

Podcast Transcript

1.23.2021 Third Sunday After Epiphany

- [Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10](#)
- [Psalm 19](#)
- [1 Corinthians 12:12-21](#)
- [Luke 4:14-21](#)

<<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* 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’m a pastor in the United Church of Christ in Northern CA serving in what’s called the South Bay aka Silicon Valley. I live in the city of Oakland in what is in called the East Bay – both the South Bay and the East Bay exist on the unseated and ancestral lands of the Ohlone people. 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 many of you listening now, and 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. We’d love to hear how you think we’re doing.
- The Word is Resistance.

Well, here we are already at the 3rd Sunday After Epiphany, which means that 2022 is ratcheting its way by. I love that our year starts off with Epiphany, with the Epiphany story – that cosmic ah-ah moment when diviners from the East came seeking the child of a poor unwed teenaged mother. Our Christian tradition tells us that Epiphany is when the Christ child is revealed to the Gentiles. But if we believe the account from the gospel of Matthew, it’s really the time when the Gentiles went looking, drawn by a star that led them to love that would transcend history and time. And what is that ah-ha moment? How is it that our Advent story filled with apocalypse, prophecy and cries for liberation from Mary herself is really about a baby? Why do we begin with the juxtaposition of a treacherous and powerful earthly king and the vulnerability of birth –

of a newborn who brings grown folks to their knees? And why on earth was Herod so flipped out about a baby?

I think it's because that ah-ha moment gathers itself into a specific realization – a realization that has consequences for all who would try to live into it – something that bell hooks would articulate thousands of years later, that “love and domination cannot coexist.”

That short sentence calls so much into question; colonization, the history of the US, the ways we are complicit in suffering that our practices uphold. In today's passage from 1 Corinthians Paul is calling for unity in a church where differences, disagreements, and rivalries have cropped up. But unity is hard and living into it requires those with the most power to relent. Because the lion and lamb can lie down together, but what each has to overcome is quite different.

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

Here's the passage from 1 Corinthians 12:12-31:

12:12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

12:13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

12:14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

12:15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

12:16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

12:17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

12:18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

12:19 If all were a single member, where would the body be?

12:20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

12:21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

12:22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,

12:23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect;

12:24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member,

12:25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

12:26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

12:27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

12:28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.

12:29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?

12:30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

12:31 But strive for the greater gifts.

Now, I call this passage Paul's weird anatomy lesson because... it's weird. However, even in its weirdness it's pretty easy to understand. Paul is using an example that everyone can relate to – the body. And, I think he's trying to be funny which is helpful when, in essence, you're telling people to behave themselves. Whatever the differences were in the church at Corinth, Paul knew he had to illustrate the devastating effects of these division on the whole. So he used the favorite standby rhetorical topic – anatomy. His method is cleverly inclusive. Paul says, "If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body." When a white person says "my ancestors didn't own slaves so I don't need to make reparations or I'm not part of that history, it doesn't mean that that white person doesn't benefit from the system of white supremacy whether they want to or not. We are part of a whole

Paul says, "If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? I'm so glad the whole body isn't an eye. I interpret this as a saying there is not a hierarchy of the senses, therefore we honor all of the different ways that people learn.

Paul says, "The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." I interpret this as saying intellect is not more valuable than body learning, and also able-bodiedness is not more valuable than a body that is differently abled.

And then there are the very strange comments about the less respectable members of our body being treated with greater respect. I really think Paul was a little into potty humor but I'm not going there.

Essentially, Paul says we are the sum of many parts. If one part is favored and dominates while another part is made weak and is neglected, the whole suffers – the whole suffers, our individual bodies, our households, our churches, our communities, our cities, our country, our world. “Love and domination cannot coexist.” Herod knew it and it infuriated him. Paul knew it and he tried to get people to do something about it.

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

Paul’s simple message about unity in the body, thus unity in Christ, is not that simple. No message about unity is simple. Unity is not just a status that we can seek, it is a process and a praxis, meaning specifically a practice separated out from theory. Unity as a theory is white people say when we are too uncomfortable talking about racism or even doing anti-racism work. We say we want unity. I’ve even heard people say they want to restore unity. On a systemic level, in America, I cannot think of what unity they’re thinking of restoring. True unity needs power to relent. White supremacy and the gross economic and social oppression that go with it have never truly relented in this country. Not really.

Unity would mean that we remember that we belong to each other. And remembering that we belong to each other would mean that we remember that we first belong to the land. As a nation we’ve forgotten all those things. When power and the powerful do not relent it may seem like that’s a good thing for those who benefit from the power structures but it’s not. It creates entitlement, rigidity, fragility and a lack of resilience that invite ruin. A few episodes ago on this podcast Rev. Anne Dunlap and Dr. Sharon Fenneman were in conversation about Jesus predicting the destruction of the temple in Mark 13:1-8. Dr. Fennema said (and I’m going to paraphrase) “what if Jesus wasn’t saying there’s this temple and then it will be destroyed? But if the destruction is part of the building of it? The very fact that Herod with his ties to the Empire built this temple around and on this sacred space and then restricted access to it through all these different ways. What if that is inherent in the building of this is the crumbling of it? I believe that’s what we’re talking about when we’re talking about white supremacy. Inherent in the creation of this sense of supremacy is its own undoing. White supremacy really is destroying the image of the Divine in each of us that white supremacy really is destroying the holiness - the sacredness of the Earth itself. And those embedded within this structure of white supremacy are experiencing this undoing.” “Love and domination cannot coexist.” When one member dominates, the whole suffers – everybody suffers. But some suffer more than others.

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

I listen to the Qanon Anonymous podcast. And per its title they talk about the Qanon conspiracy theories that we saw on parade last Jan 6th at our nation's Capital. They also talk about all kinds of other conspiracy theories, many that intersect with Qanon but not all. People believe some really wild things. I used to get angry at the people peddling this information and at the people who believe it, some of whom have committed crimes in service to these beliefs including violent crimes. Now I feel heartbroken when I hear some of these stories. We live in a world where it's easier and more desirable for some people to believe there is a cabal of satanic pedophiles who drink the blood of children, or that JFK Jr. is really alive and going to become president or that COVID was created by Bill Gates than it is to believe that our country, this country we've created is crumbling because of greed and apathy and incompetence on the part of our leaders. And the part that everyone is trying to willfully forget and force out of public education that this country, that a country build on genocide and slavery, that has never acknowledged its sin or told the whole truth is destined to fall. Yeah, way more exciting to think it's the blood-drinking pedophiles.

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

But don't worry, I'm not going to leave you all on the downer destined-to-fall-blood-drinking-pedophiles note. I don't know what the future holds, but if we can learn anything from Paul's weird anatomy lesson it's that what we do matters, who we love matters, that we love matters. It's that coming together across difference isn't about an equal playing field, it's about an equitable distribution of power and resources. Not one big eye with not hand or a head with no feet but those parts working together of the whole. Not seizing power, but about power understanding what it is, how it can be used, given away, let go of for the good of the whole – for the good of everybody. Writer, teacher and disability justice activist Mia Mingus wrote a justifiably blistering essay about the lack of solidarity of able-bodied folks during this pandemic. I think Paul might agree with her. She says, "'I need you to not only say that you are in solidarity with disabled people or that you value disability justice; I need you to practice it. I need you to engage in the hard conversations with fellow abled people about vaccines and boosters, masks and canceling in-person gatherings, travel and work. Many disabled people have been doing this labor because we do not have a choice. We have been losing connections, yelled at, mocked, ridiculed, told we are overreacting, harassing or controlling simply because we do not wish to die [...] How to put into words the demoralization of needing people who do not need you?' That last sentence chills my insides. 'If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.'"

Solidarity, unity, they are practices distinctly pulled away from theory. They are actions. One of the most beautiful books I've read about the action of unity and true remembrance of belonging is Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*. In a chapter called "A Mother's Work" she tells the story of restoring a pond on her property so that her daughters can have a swimming hole. In the process she removes algae and other plant life, disrupts a bunch of polliwogs and almost harms a bird's nest but saves it before it's too late. She acknowledges that in her quest to be a good mother she is interrupting the motherhood of other creatures, plant and animal. She is very thoughtful about her work on the pond, and fully understands the power she has as a human

being with modern gardening tools snipping, clipping and raking the pond life. I will close with an excerpt of *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

“So it is my grandchildren who will swim in this pond, and others whom the years will bring. The circle of care grows larger and caregiving for my little pond spills over to caregiving for other waters. The outlet for my pond runs downhill to my good neighbor’s pond. What I do here matters. Everybody lives downstream. My pond drains to the brook, to the creek, to a great and needful lake. The water net connects us all. I have shed tears into that flow when I thought that motherhood would end. But the pond has shown me that being a good mother doesn’t end with creating a home where just my children can flourish. A good mother grows into a richly eutrophic old woman, knowing that her work doesn’t end until she creates a home where all of life’s beings can flourish. There are grandchildren to nurture, and frog children, nestlings, goslings, seedlings, and spores, and I still want to be a good mother.

I think Paul would agree with that.

My call to action this week is to give to the Sogorea Te Land Trust an urban Indigenous women-led land trust that facilitates the return of Indigenous land to Indigenous people. This organization is in the Bay Area in California, so if you’d rather give in your area then find a land trust, indigenous land trust nearer to you and get involved or give money there. There will be links 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. Sarah Howell-Miller.

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

<https://sogoreate-landtrust.org/>

<https://www.landtrustalliance.org/news/source-all-sustains-us>

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The Word is Resistance – Don't Get Distracted

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Mia Mingus. You Are Not Entitled To Our Deaths: COVID, Abled Supremacy & Interdependence. Leaving Evidence. January 16, 2021.

https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2022/01/16/you-are-not-entitled-to-our-deaths-covid-abled-supremacy-interdependence/?fbclid=IwAR1f7TQJoZvVPS7MtjnKWf4h2SWtvbXWbGcfCZ8pDlAgU_xx1YYYn1CWALU

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