

Podcast Transcript

9.3.2023 and Pentecost 14A

- Exodus 3:1-15 and Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45b • Jeremiah 15:15-21 and Psalm 26:1-8 • **Romans 12:9-21** • Matthew 16:21-28
- Title: #WrestlingWithRomans - We Are Building Up a New World
- Description: This new reality Paul's been sharing with us - about everyone being included in a mighty tree as one beloved community - seems a long way off, doesn't it? Join Rev. Liz Kearny as she asks, "How do we get from here to there?" We can imagine that Paul's Gentile audience in Rome is asking the very same question. In response, Paul gives the church in Rome - and all of us - daily practices and ways of being that disrupt empire and help us build up a new world.

Note: The opening and closing grounding moments in this episode use the words of Silvia Federici, quoted in an Instagram post from Chiara Francesca (linked in the transcript).

Transcript available here: <https://surj.org/our-work/surj-faith/twir/>

#WrestlingWithRomans #MutualAid #Abolition #SolidarityAcrossDifference
#DontGetWeary #ThoughTheWayBeLong

<<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:]

Hi everyone. Welcome back to The Word Is Resistance, the podcast where we're exploring what Christian sacred texts have to teach us about finding our way back to each other in the context of rising authoritarianism and fascism, the devastation of racial capitalism and climate disaster, and every aspect of the empire's death machinery that is so thick in our daily lives - the context in which we are living today. Through Christian scripture and our various traditions, what wellsprings of nourishment can we drink from, especially as white folks, so that we are well-nourished for developing our mutual interest in movements for liberation?

My name is Rev. Liz Kearny. My pronouns are she/her.

I am an ordained Presbyterian Church U.S.A. pastor living in the occupied ancestral homelands of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe in so-called Longview, Washington. I'm a member of the SURJ Faith Organizing Team and I'm so glad to be back with you for this 14th Sunday after Pentecost as we continue #WrestlingWithRomans!

This podcast is a project of SURJ Faith and is particularly designed for white Christians—white Christians getting into conversation with other white Christians about how to challenge every system that threatens life. We believe white Christians have a responsibility to commit ourselves to resisting white supremacy, settler colonialism, the cishetero-patriarchy, antisemitism, ableism, and every system of oppression that stands in the way of our collective thriving. We are called to show up and disrupt these powers and principalities wherever we find them, especially through the Christian tradition.

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

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

I want to start with gratitude for each person who has engaged with this series we have been doing all summer, following the Revised Common Lectionary through Romans. This will be my last podcast for this particular series, and I have to say that I am not the same after going through this experience. Throughout this series, you’ve heard so many of us talk about how much the wrestling part of this series turned out to be true. I joked with Rev. Anne that maybe this would have been easier if we would have decided to name this series something like #EasilyComingToNewConclusionsAboutRomansWithoutALotOfStressOrStruggle. Jokes aside, y’all have made a safe space for us to fumble through the cultivation of a different interpretation of Romans that can help all of us get free. What a gift you have given us. Thank you. I am especially grateful knowing that next week will be this podcast’s 300th episode, and the incredible Rev. Jean Jeffress will be bringing us a resistance word to help us ring in that milestone that *you* have helped us reach as a part of this podcast community. It’s so good to be in this together with you.

Before we jump in, I’d invite you to find some way to get your feet flat on the ground and to put a hand on your heart. Breathe in, and let it out. Hear these words from Chiara Francesca: “our bodies contain the wisdom of thousands of years of co-evolution with the land and all other creatures, our bodies are time machines evolved in harmony with pre-capitalist ecosystems and already primed for post-capitalist futures...”¹ Breathe in, and let it out. Now let’s dig in...

In our reading for this week, Romans 12, verses 9-21, Paul is taking us from the big-picture-painting space where he has helped his Gentile beloveds understand the cosmic story

¹ Words from Silvia Federici, quoted by Chiara Francesca in an Instagram post found here: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CwbDZcTPVJe/>

of liberation and resistance they are being grafted into. It's a story that started with their Jewish siblings who have always been at the root of the beloved community tree where all, all, all folx are being welcomed in.

And starting last week with chapter 12, verses 1-8, the always brilliant Brigitta Vieyra helped us understand how Paul is now inviting his people into "radical tenderness" as "a liberatory spiritual disposition of interdependence,"² as Brigitta so beautifully puts it, the climax of this love song that Paul has been singing to his people throughout the whole letter.

Now, beginning in verse 9, Paul goes deeper into the nitty gritty of how to practice being this beloved community of radically tender interdependence through one's daily interactions and choices. And before I get into what those practices are actually all about, I want to pause here to admire and appreciate the genius of Paul's decision to offer these tangible practices to the faith community in Rome. He has just cast this grand vision of what God has always been up to in calling the Jewish people into anti-empire faithfulness, and he has made the compelling case that the time in history has come for all, all, all folx, including the Gentile members of the faith community in Rome, to follow in these resistance footsteps so that they too can all build a world where every being is grafted into that tree of abundance and liberation. And like a thoughtful preacher, Paul knows that the Gentiles in Rome are probably gonna say something like, "Paul, that sounds amazing, but more than just a little naïve. How on earth do you expect us to actually get to that place where we are living in this community of abundance and solidarity across difference, especially with the Roman empire breathing down our necks day in and day out? They are so big, and we are so small." I hear in this question echoes of so many questions I was asking when the movement to abolish the prison industrial complex was new to me during the uprisings in 2020. "Yeah, it sounds amazing to live in a world without the punishing forces of cops, courts, and cages as our ways for addressing harm, but that seems like a naïve vision," I remember thinking, "How on earth are we supposed to actually get to a place where we are creating healing and accountability outside of those systems? They are so big, and we are so small." These kinds of questions arise from a place of desperation, that part of whiteness that demands urgency and perfection and all the answers tied up with a bow.

But Paul won't be pushed by anyone's sense of urgency to hand his folx all the answers in the form of a step-by-step instructional guide. Because, spoiler alert, that doesn't exist! Instead, what I hear him saying in this passage is something like: "We will get to this beautiful beloved community not with a defined map, *but with practice, practice and more practice*. We will get there with our daily choices - small and big - that will help us navigate the empire-soaked mess of today." The practices Paul will share here are meant to help Paul's folx, in the words Mariame

² Brigitta Vieyra, "The Word Is Resistance: 8.27.23 #WrestlingWith Romans: Radical Tenderness," https://soundcloud.com/thewordisresistance/twir-82723-wrestlingwithromans-radical-tenderness?si=422105f9130d4331ad9e0364647fb50e&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

Kaba and Shira Hassan's transformative justice workbook,³ "fumble towards repair," together, one step at a time. These practices will be the multi-colored Lego blocks that will help the faith community in Rome build up a new world, just like Minister Daryl J. Walker helps us sing together every week on this podcast.

With all this in mind, let's take in the daily practices Paul invites us to commit to together in Romans 12, verses 9-21...

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. 20 No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

An illuminating exercise I did as I thought through the kind of world these practices help us to build was to create two columns on a page of my journal. In the right hand column, under the title "Practices of the beloved community," I listed the practices Paul calls us to in this passage. In the left hand column under the title "Practices of the empire," I wrote which practices of Rome's death machine Paul's practices were intended to challenge and resist. I'm going to read to you what showed up in this two-column exercise, starting with a practice of empire and moving to a practice that disrupts that oppression with an embodied action of the beloved community.

The empire says, "Serve *Caesar*, because without his benevolence, you have no hope. Buy into the emperor's program of domination or give into despair."

By contrast, the beloved community says, "Serve *the Lord*. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer" (v. 11b-12).

The empire says, "Hoard whatever you can get your hands on. Look out for *you* and the people *like you*."

³ Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan, *Fumbling Towards Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators*, Project NIA/Just Practice, June 2019: <https://www.akpress.org/fumbling-towards-repair.html>

By contrast, the beloved community says, “Contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to *strangers*” (v. 13).

The empire says, “Believe us when we say that submitting to our military might and trusting the system we have created to punish those who step out of line will give you the security you are searching for.”

By contrast, the beloved community says, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” (v. 14). “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all” (v. 17). “Beloved, never avenge yourselves... No,” Paul writes, quoting some ancient Jewish wisdom from Proverbs 25:21-22, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads,” (v. 20) which was probably a colorful way of noting the reddening cheeks of a person “who is shamed by the receipt of kindness from one to whom the recipient has been unkind...”⁴

The empire says, “Hey Gentiles, you’re gonna have to participate in our oppression of your Jewish siblings. At best, that’s how you are going to win some points with the Roman authorities that will get you a bit higher in the social hierarchy. But if you decide not to do that, the very least you should do is look away from how we are persecuting them and numb yourself to the ways they are suffering at our hands.”

By contrast, the beloved community says in a resistance word of solidarity, “Rejoice *with those* who rejoice, weep *with those* who weep. Live in harmony *with one another*; do not be haughty but *associate with* the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are...” (v. 15-16)

The empire says, “We are too big and powerful and inevitable for you to resist. Look how much easier it is to just go along with our program of domination. Give up this fight. Just accept that empire will always be the way of things.”

By contrast, the beloved community says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

What do you notice about these practices Paul is calling his Gentile audience to in Rome?

I notice a few things.

The first is what feels like a call to practice softness and vulnerability with one another, that radical tenderness Brigitta talked to us about on last week’s podcast. “Let love be genuine,” (v. 9) Paul says... “love one another with mutual affection....” (v. 10). This is revolutionary in a system where a Gentile living in Rome would, I imagine, be tempted to stay as numb as possible

⁴ Amy-Jill Levine; Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: Second Edition, Fully Revised and Expanded, New Revised Standard Version*, Oxford University Press, 2017, footnotes on pg. 313.

when they saw their Jewish siblings being ruthlessly attacked and persecuted by Rome's governing authorities. And in the midst of that, Paul insists, "Resist the urge to harden your heart when your Jewish siblings are being targeted - *weep with those who weep*. Remember that at the end of the day, what is hurting them is hurting you too. Rome may be known for their iron weaponry, but you, people of resistance, will be known by the tenderness of your love for one another."

I also hear in these practices an ethic of abolition, a clarity that practices of domination and punishment in response to harm are not going to get at the root of the devastation Rome is causing. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them" (v. 14), "do not repay anyone evil for evil..." (v. 17), feed your enemies who are hungry and give them something to drink if they are thirsty (v. 20). Not because you are to roll over and take whatever abuse you are given, but because we won't get free by attempting to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house, in the words of Audre Lorde.⁵

I can also hear in these verses a call to re-knit-together the intimacy empire works so hard to destroy, a way of speaking about this that you may remember Rev. Anne giving us by way of a quote from Ruby Sales in Rev. Anne's podcast on John 11 this past Lenten season.⁶ "One of the great trigger fingers of the empire," Ruby Sales has said, "is to destroy intimacy, to destroy how we know each other."⁷ Paul calls his people to the opposite - radical hospitality that will bring them again and again into solidarity with one another, a deep re-knowing of each other even as Rome tries to drive them apart. This practice of sharing with those most targeted by empire has always been a central practice of God's people in the Torah, a call to generously share what one has with whoever needs it. "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers" (v. 13), Paul writes. And y'know what? I think this is about more than being generous because that's the right thing to do. We need to remember that when we stop hoarding resources and start sharing with one another, when we join with folx across our differences, even if they are a stranger to us at first, we will start to know one another more deeply and be more invested in our collective well-being. And empires are *terrified* of this re-knitting together of intimacy because *they know we will start to share with each other our tender stories of the ways empire has been harming us*. And when that happens? Well, we will stop directing our rage at each other and start directing it towards the source of our suffering - the folx at the very tippy top who are exploiting our labor for their gain.

⁵ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." 1984.

Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 110-

114. 2007: https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Lorde_The_Masters_Tools.pdf

⁶ Rev. Anne Dunlap, *The Word Is Resistance: Episode 276: Do You Believe This?* 3.26.23, [3.26.23 Lent 5A Transcript Anne](#)

⁷ Ruby Sales interview at OnBeing:

<https://onbeing.org/programs/ruby-sales-where-does-it-hurt/>

Heather McGhee tells this amazing story about how this kind of re-knitting together of intimacy led to the building of a powerful coalition to win the fight for a \$15/hour minimum wage, and that's coming to mind for me here. "I'll never forget Bridget," McGhee writes, "a white woman I met in Kansas City who had worked in fast food for over a decade. When a co-worker at Wendy's first approached her about joining a local #FightFor15 group pushing for a livable minimum wage, she was skeptical. 'I didn't think that things in my life would ever change,' she told me. 'They weren't going to give \$15 to a fast food worker. That was just insane to me.' But Bridget attended the first organizing meeting anyway. And when a Latina woman rose and described her life — three children in a two-bedroom apartment with bad plumbing, the feeling of being 'trapped in a life where she didn't have any opportunity to do anything better' — Bridget, also a mother of three, said she was struck by how 'I was really able to see myself in her.'"

"I had been fed this whole line of, 'These immigrant workers are coming over here and stealing our jobs — not paying taxes, committing crimes and causing problems,' Bridget admitted. 'You know, us against them.' Soon after she began organizing, the cross-racial movement had won a convert. 'In order for all of us to come up, it's not a matter of me coming up and them staying down,' [Bridget] said. 'It's the matter of: In order for me to come up, they have to come up too. Because honestly, as long as we're divided, we're conquered.'"⁸

Forces of empire are not trying to keep us apart from one another just because they are mean. They are trying to keep us apart because they are *scared of our power*. Meeting each other's tangible needs, across our lines of difference, means we'll start to know each other's stories, and as we tell those stories to one another, it will start to become more and more clear just how much empire has lied to each of us, the way far-right leaders had been lying to folx like Bridget about immigrants being the source of her suffering as a poor white person in America. This deep knowing of each other is a re-knitting-together of intimacy, and that leads to real solidarity. And from that real solidarity comes a coalition across all kinds of differences. And a coalition like that is exactly the kind of anti-imperial power that will, in Paul's words, "overcome evil with good" (v. 21b).

"We are all part of this one, wild, mysterious tree," Paul has said. "And here's how you ought to treat each other and the folx who may feel like strangers to you right now: Stay soft and vulnerable with one another. Understand that the root of harm is only transformed by accountability wrapped in tender care. Make your way back to each other across every dividing line Rome has tried to convince you is real. Rejoice with each other and weep with each other as you share your stories - this is anti-numbing medicine that will keep you tender towards one another. As you do these things, regularly, daily, never alone, the tree will grow, new branches

⁸ Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, New York : One World, (2021), quoted in <https://www.facebook.com/moworkerscenter/posts/heather-mcghee-in-the-nyt-ill-never-forget-bridget-a-white-woman-i-met-in-kansas/119127020488305/>

will be grafted in, the roots will deepen, and there ain't no imperial storm on this earth that can bring that tree down." As Dr. Pamela Eisenbaum puts it, this is "the spiritual work that brings about the [kin]dom of God."⁹ This, my beloveds is how we get busy building up a new world.

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

The call to action I have for us this week is really Paul's call to action to his Gentile siblings in this text: daily practices of the beloved community that disrupt the empire's hold on us and our precious bodies. First, *notice* this week where you feel empire trying to keep you in the well-worn grooves of domination, punishment, isolation, and numbness. Take a moment to *pause* when you notice these forces at work. Feel it in your body. This pause in itself is an interruption of the well-worn-ness of that neural pathway that makes it all too easy to just go along with the ways the empire's death machine is harming all of us. That deep breath you take in the moment of noticing, I believe, is the breath of the Spirit, opening up the tiniest of portals for you to take a step into the new world.

After you've taken this pause to notice with intention, consider: which of the practices Paul has given us might you embody as your act of resistance, right here, right now?

Is doom-scrolling through news posts on your phone making you feel overwhelmed with grief? Instead of getting lost in despair, pick one news story that hurts your heart the most. Let yourself cry, scream, punch the air, grieve. Listen deeply to the voices of those most impacted and then *Weep with those who weep*. And then find a mutual aid group led by those most impacted and send some funds their way to tend to the ways empire is harming them. *Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers*.

The ancestral homelands of the Kānaka Maoli people in Maui is one place I'll be directing my softness and solidarity this week in response to the wildfires that ravaged the island a few weeks ago. These fires were not a natural disaster, but a disaster of empire, as colonizers have diverted the island's water supply more and more to support an extractive tourism industry that I myself have participated in when I have gone to visit the island in years past. I'm grateful to one of our podcast team members, Nichola Torbett, who shared with me the website of 'Āina Momona, which has a list of vetted organizations we can donate to to send some mutual aid to the folx most impacted by these fires, especially to the Indigenous communities who are already disproportionately pushed out of their homelands by the sky-rocketing housing prices created by settler colonialism. I'll put that website highlighting those organizations in the resources section of this transcript if you would like to join me in contributing to the needs of our siblings suffering under empire this week, as we find ways to resist empire through solidarity.

⁹ Dr. Pamela M. Eisenbaum, *Invitation to Romans: Participant Book: A Short-Term DISCIPLE Bible Study*, Abingdon Press (2012), pg. 68.

This is just one idea for how you can practice this new world into existence. I trust the creativity of the Spirit in you to open up possibilities that make sense where you are planted right now, and we would actually love to hear about those! Don't hesitate to send us a message to tell your story about how you are practicing a new world into being where you live. I love these practices Paul gave us, because we never have to wait around to get started. We can practice these things everywhere and we can start them anywhere. Let's get to it, dear ones. And let's do it together.

[Outro:]

Thanks as always for joining us. We'd love to hear from you all, and especially folks of color and non-Christian folks, 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. Next week we'll have another incredible resistance word from the Rev. Jean Jeffress as the wrestling continues. And remember, **next week's episode with Rev. Jean will be our 300th episode!** We have each and every one of you to thank for that. Finally, a huge thanks as always to our sound editor, Claire Hitchens! We appreciate you so much!

I mean it when I say that I love y'all. So much. I said to the SURJ Faith Organizing Team after an event we had a couple weeks ago that SURJ Faith is the deepest feeling of belonging I have ever felt, and that nourishes me more than you could possibly know. Thank you for being a part of this community.

As we close, I'd invite you to again put your feet flat on the ground and to put a hand on your heart. Breathe in, and let it out. Take in more words of liberation from Chiara Francesca: "our bodies speak singing messages from interconnected pasts steering our present struggles whispering invitations to liberated futures,

let us remember that when we are lost we can always come back to the body therein lies a roadmap and a compass, if we can stop and listen."¹⁰

Until next time, beloveds, I'm Rev. Liz Kearny, and I'm sending you all the tenderness in my heart.

*<<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.>>*

~ ~ ~

¹⁰ Words from Silvia Federici, quoted by Chiara Francesca in an Instagram post found here: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CwbDZcTPVJe/>

RESOURCES:

Visit 'Āina Momona's website to send relief to those most impacted by the fires in Maui:

<https://www.kaainamomona.org/maui>

From 'Āina Momona's website, I donated to the Maui Mutual Aid Fund by following this link -

Join me!: <http://mauirapidresponse.org/maui-wildfire/donations/>

These funds are directly disbursed to Maui residents affected by the fires. Disbursement priorities are led by a group of Kānaka Maoli community members to ensure equity.

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Words from Silvia Federici, quoted by Chiara Francesca in an Instagram post found here:

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