

Podcast Transcript

July 24, 2022 Pentecost 7C

Hosea 1:2-10 and Psalm 85 • Genesis 18:20-32 and Psalm 138 • Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19) •

Luke 11:1-13

<<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:]

Welcome to The Word Is Resistance, a weekly podcast hosted by Showing Up for Racial Justice. Each week, we take up the assigned readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, asking what the Christian Scriptures can show us of God’s dream of liberation and flourishing for all creation. In the context of empire, white supremacy, and a culture of domination and oppression, we come together to wonder how these ancient texts might inspire decolonial, antiracist, and liberatory spiritual practices and faith-filled living for such a time as this.

I’m Rev. Sarah Howell-Miller and my pronouns are she or they. I’m a United Methodist minister, and I live in what is currently known as Winston-Salem, North Carolina, on the ancestral lands of the Tutelo, Occaneechi, and Keyauwee peoples. This podcast is a project of SURJ Faith and is particularly designed for white Christians—white Christians talking to other white Christians about race and white supremacy. We believe white Christians like us, 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 do this work remembering we are building up a new world. 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.

This episode is part of our podcast series on disability justice. We are in the midst of exploring the Luke texts in the lectionary through that framework, the framework of disability justice, and we’ll continue to do so until mid-October. We are asking questions like:

- What can we learn about these stories by centering disability justice as our interpretive lens?
- What can we learn as white Christians about ableism – in the texts themselves, as well as in how the texts have been used or interpreted – and how it upholds white supremacy? How can centering disability justice be key to collective liberation?

- We also want to name how white, imperial Christianity has constructed and upheld ableism and how whiteness & white Christianity are disabling.
- And we also want to remember mutual interest! What's at stake for us as white Christians, especially abled white Christians, when we center disability justice?

So join me now as we explore these questions and more in relation to our Luke text for the week. As we prepare to do so, I invite you to take a moment to center yourself, whatever that might look or sound or feel like. I'm going to start us off with a prayer of confession, inviting us all to ask God to help us release the things that hold us back from individual and collective liberation. Join me in this prayer of confession, adapted from a prayer by Adrian White:

*Loving God, you pour out grace upon us exactly as we are,
but we confess we are suspicious and react from fear of scarcity.
You invite us to take our shoes off
and receive the care our bodies need, but we hesitate.
We sort bodies into worthy and unworthy ones
to mask our insecurities.
We reject and punish fat bodies, disabled bodies,
transgender bodies, and racialized bodies—
even when those bodies are our very own.
God, remind us that we are made in your image.
Help us learn to receive from your abundance
so we can share all that we have with others.
Let us see that the cups we longingly hold out are already full.
Let them overflow so that all will have enough. Amen.*

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

[Main Content:]

The gospel for this week comes from Luke chapter 11, verses 1 through 13.

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." So he said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother

me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything. 'I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asked for an egg, would give a scorpion? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

One of the hermeneutical lenses I applied to this week's gospel lesson was an unconventional one: the 2003 Disney/Pixar movie *Finding Nemo*. My church is doing a summer movie series where we're watching family friendly films together on a weeknight and then drawing on themes from the movies alongside Scripture in Sunday services.

In case you are somehow unfamiliar with *Finding Nemo* or just need a refresher, it tells the story of a young clownfish, Nemo, and his father, Marlin, who live in a sea anemone on the Great Barrier Reef. One day, Nemo gets sick of his dad's overprotective parenting style and rebels by swimming out into open water, where he is scooped up by a diver and taken away on a boat. And Marlin begins an epic journey across the ocean to find his son.

I have seen *Finding Nemo* more times than I could possibly count—there was one year in high school where I babysat a toddler who went through a phase of demanding to watch it multiple times a week. But my most recent viewing revealed something to me that had never occurred to me before. Nemo is disabled. One of his pectoral fins is smaller than the other; he calls it his “lucky fin,” a term that has been taken up by some families of children with limb difference.

Nemo's “lucky fin” itself is impossible to miss, I simply had never thought of it in terms of disability until I watched it with this podcast series and Disability Pride Month in the back of my mind. Nemo isn't even the only disabled character in the movie—Dory, the cheerful blue tang fish voiced by Ellen DeGeneres has acute short-term memory loss, and it becomes clear that Marlin's anxiety, which stems from the trauma of losing Nemo's mother and sibling eggs to a barracuda attack, is disabling to his emotions and relationships.

A film review in a journal of disability studies pointed out that there's a reason the disability aspect of *Finding Nemo* is often missed, especially by abled viewers. Dr. Ann Millett says that conventional narratives show disabled characters as one-dimensional and often make their disability the primary challenge or obstacle that they have to overcome, fix, or change to become more “normal.” *Finding Nemo* is an unconventional narrative of disability that instead “paints

disability as a flavorful ingredient in cultural diversity” and “as a socially constructed character quality.”

Finding Nemo imagines and models a world where disability is an aspect of diversity, marking characters as unique rather than defective. Any disadvantage Nemo faces in relation to his “lucky fin” comes not from any evidence but from his father’s repeated assertion that Nemo is not a strong swimmer, though we never see evidence of that. The movie gives us characters for whom disability is just one part of who they are and doesn’t preclude them from having and using other gifts and talents—Dory may not be able to remember what you told her 2 minutes ago, but she can read human writing, a skill that becomes invaluable in the search for Nemo.

And here’s where all this contemplation about animated fish connects in with our lectionary text for this week: *Finding Nemo* demonstrates a key dimension of disability and disability justice, and that is the necessity of asking for help and the importance of finding trustworthy helpers along the way. When Nemo is first taken by the boat, Marlin races after it in an attempt to catch up but is soon left behind, so he starts asking every sea creature he passes, “Help me, please!” until finally he meets Dory. Over the course of the movie, Marlin and Nemo find help from countless other fish, from a group of sea turtles, from one giant whale, and even from a pelican and a shark.

In our podcast episode from 2 weeks ago, Nichola Torbett offered a beautiful reflection on interdependence and asking for help in conversation with disability justice. She drew on the work of Mia Mingus, a queer, disabled Korean adoptee who talks about forced intimacy, which happens when disabled people must rely on strangers or people they do not trust for their access needs. Mingus contrasts forced intimacy with access intimacy, which she describes as “that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs.” I won’t repeat Nichola’s reflections in full here, but if you haven’t heard the July 3 episode of *The Word Is Resistance*, please do.

Access intimacy can involve an ask or request, but underlying it is a sense of trust that needs will be understood and met. And this is what strikes me about our text from Luke chapter 11: it is very much about being persistent and asking boldly—again, go back to Nichola’s recent episode for deeper reflection on that—but there is something else at work here, and that is Jesus’ assurance that needs can and will be met. *Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.*

Jesus presumes a world that can hold and meet our needs. We know we are a long way off from that world—in a country where worship of capitalism makes no room for disability or difference; in a nation where the stripping of reproductive rights is keeping disabled and chronically ill people from getting needed medications today; in a land where queer people and trans people

and people of color are disabled and disadvantaged by racism and homophobia; in a time where the prevalence of gun violence means that individuals as well as communities are killed and disabled by white supremacy, misogyny, and dehumanization.

Because we are so far from the world that Jesus assumes in this passage, we may be tempted to cynicism. It often feels more accurate, especially for disabled people and other marginalized groups, to say: ask and you will be rejected, search and you will come up empty, knock and someone will turn you away. But we must remember that we are not just passive recipients of this world, we are co-creators in it. In Amy Kenny's book *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church*, she says this: "When we claim disability is part of a social construct, we forget that we are its construction workers."

Yes, the powers of racialized capitalism, corporate greed, and institutionalized ableism do an awful lot of the heavy lifting when it comes to constructing disability. But we, too, are construction workers, and even if we cannot snap our fingers and turn this broken world into the world Jesus envisions, a world that can hold and meet all our needs, we can build up a new world right where we are. We can take steps to divest from ableist, racist, and oppressive practices and institutions, and collectively to lay a new foundation.

Mia Mingus offers a vision for a world shaped by access intimacy, put into practice by what she calls "Liberatory access." She writes, "Liberatory access gets us closer to the world we want and ache for, rather than simply reinforcing the status quo. It lives in the now and the future." Disability justice, Mingus says, is the political container for liberatory access, because it reminds us that the aim is not just to give disabled people access to the system as it is, but to transform systems and build them anew.

If we are disability's construction workers, we have many tools at our disposal: we have our bold asking, seeking, and knocking, our political demands and our vocal support of and mutual interest with those who are disabled by empire, capitalism, and oppression. We have the compelling story of liberatory access and the voices of disability justice practitioners, especially Queer and Trans Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, to teach us and guide our work. And we have Jesus' implied command to create a world where all can ask and receive, seek and find, knock and be welcomed in. May we build up that new world together where disability is an aspect of cultural diversity and a source of creative and generative hope rather than a site of oppression, in the name of the disabled God who lived, died, and rose again in solidarity with us all.

<<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:]

As I thought about how we can be construction workers of something other than an oppressive ableism, I found myself at once overwhelmed with the scope of the task and reminded of a song by Quaker poet and songwriter Carrie Newcomer. In the album notes for her song “Three Feet or So,” she writes, “I reference in this song a beautiful story by Greg Ellison that affirms the idea that we may not be able to change the whole world, but we can change what is three feet around us. We have enormous power to create positive change in the world in how we choose to live our daily lives.”

Our call to action is to figure out where within three feet or so we can be construction workers building up a new world shaped by disability justice and liberatory access. If you are part of a faith community with a physical building, ask if an accessibility audit has ever been done and find out if there are access needs that ought to be addressed. If you post regularly to social media and don’t already include image descriptions for the visually impaired or add captions to videos, take some time to learn how to do that and start new habits around content creation. Especially if you are hearing, considering learning American Sign Language from a Deaf person; I recommend Queer ASL as a 2SLGBTQQIA+ positive resource for online classes. These are just a few possible actions to take; what your three feet or so look like might reveal other opportunities. We’d love to hear what that looks like for you and your community.

[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. Next week we’ll have a resistance Word from Rev. M Jade Kaiser. And finally, a huge thanks to our sound editor, Claire!

[Words of blessing/encouragement:]

I’ll leave you with these words from Carrie Newcomer’s song “Three Feet or So”:

*We are body, skin and bones,
We’re all the loss we’ve ever known,
What is gone is always near,*

We're all the love that brought us here.

*I can't change the whole world.
But I can change the world I know,
What's within three feet or so.*

*And the things that have saved us
Are still here to save us.
It's not out there somewhere
It's right here, it's right here.*

Amen.

<<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:

Queer ASL: <https://www.queerasl.com/>

(Note: There is debate within the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community as to whether Deafness is a disability. I make this reference not to make a determination on that but in the spirit of acknowledging that our collective failure regularly to take into account the access needs of Deaf/HoH folks is disabling.)

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