

“Resistance”

*Part III of VI in the sermon series
“400 years of Africans in America”*

Luke 12:32-40

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From the Pulpit

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I would like to share a narrative of resistance that doesn't involve or lead to violence or warring. I want to share with you my struggle as I reflected and prepared for this conversation on resistance. I think we sometimes overlook what all resistance can be, especially when it comes to resistance in relation to historic and present-day racial tensions. I researched online and found books, but most often found a contentious, vicious portrayal of resistance to slavery. This picture of resistance is one that doesn't lead me, and I imagine many, toward finding peace and reconciliation together. Rebellion, running away, and "softer" day-to-day acts of microaggressions can dominate the portrayal of resistance and this dominance consequently heavily influences today's means for resisting. When "fight or flight" is the dominant image of resistance, it's no wonder we know groups of peoples who have been and are at odds end here in America. Can resistance be something more- something more constructive and humane, something more meaningful?

“Resistance”

Luke 12:32-40

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God of justice, your word is light and truth. Let your face shine on us to restore us, that we may walk in your way, seeking justice and doing good. Amen.

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Today, I’m going to follow in Tim’s footsteps and hopefully share with you a story you haven’t heard yet. This story is of Saint Walatta Petros. This is an important story that needs to be shared. It’s not only the narrative of Walatta Petros’ life, but is the earliest known biography of an African woman, and an early account of resistance to European protocolonialism from an African perspective. Walatta Petros is a rare look at African women’s domestic lives and relationships with other women.

Walatta Petros might seem to be unique. She is, after all, a literate seventeenth- century African noblewoman. She was an important leader, directing a successful movement against

Europeans and overcoming local male leadership. Her Ethiopian disciples wrote a book about her called *The Life and Struggles of our Mother Walatta Petros*. Yet, closer examination reveals that Walatta Petros is not unique, but rather an exemplary case.

Many are surprised to hear that Africans were writing any books several hundred years ago, much less books in an African language about an individual woman. The general public assumes that ancient, medieval, and early modern Africans did not create written texts, and even scholars may assume that the publication of Chinua Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart" in 1958 represents the genesis of written African literature. Yet, Ethiopia and Eritrea are nations in East Africa whose African peoples, the Habasas, have been reading and writing bound manuscripts in their literary language of Ge'ez since the fourth century CE.

Many of us are also surprised to hear that Africans were Christians well before the 1600s, assuming that Christianity in Africa is always the result of western missionary activity. Yet the Habasas are among the oldest Christians in the world—King Ezana and his court converted in the 330s CE. The Habasa practice is a form of African Christianity that predates many forms of European Christianity and is variously called

non-Chalcedonian, monophysite, Coptic, Oriental Orthodox, or Ethiopian Orthodox. Members themselves prefer the term Tawahedo Church. Their ancient form of African Christianity is distinctive, holding some beliefs dear that are considered heretical by the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant churches, and Eastern Orthodoxy.

The Walatta Petros narrative is written without a western audience in mind. Its Habasa authorship assumes a contemporary Habasa readership; that is, those as knowledgeable about its events, people, places, books, time, and rituals as the authors are. Maybe for this reason alone, western minds are in need of it.

Saint Walatta Petros lived in the early 17th century and is one of thirty female saints in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawaḥedo Church and one of only six of these women saints with hagiographies. She was a religious and monastic leader who led a nonviolent revolt against Roman Catholicism, defending the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawaḥedo Church when the Jesuits persuaded King Susenyos to proclaim Roman Catholicism the faith of the land. Her name, Walatta Petros means “daughter of St. Peter.” Her followers wrote down the story of her life about thirty years after she died in 1672. She was born in 1592 into a noble family, her mother was named Krestos Ebaya (“In Christ lies her greatness”) and her father was named Baḥer

Saggad (“The regions by the sea submits to him”). Her father adored her, treating her with great reverence and predicting that bishops and kings would bow down to her, giving her the name of the man upon whom God built his church, Peter.

Walatta Petros was married at a young age to King Susenyos’s chief advisor, Malke’a Krestos (“Image of Christ”). After all three of her children died in infancy, she grew tired of the things of this world and determined to leave her husband to become a nun. Not long after, in 1612, Susenyos privately converted from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawaḥedo Church to Roman Catholicism, and over the next ten years, he urged those in his court, including her, to convert as well, finally delivering an edict banning their own orthodoxy in 1622. When Walatta Petros first left her husband, around 1615, he razed a town to retrieve her and she returned to him so that more people would not be harmed. Then she discovered that her husband had been involved in the murder of the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawaḥedo Church and she again determined to leave her husband, starving herself until he let her go. She immediately went to a monastery on Lake Ṭana and became a nun at the age of 25, in 1617. There she met, for the first time, Eheta Krestos, the woman who became her constant companion in life and work.

Walatta Petros lived quietly as a devout and hard-working nun and might have remained as such if the king had not banned orthodoxy. Her hagiographer reported that she did not want to keep company with any of the converts, so she took several nuns and servants and led her companions 100 miles east of Lake Tana to the district of Şeyat. There she began to preach against Roman Catholicism, adding that any king who had converted was an apostate and accursed. The king soon heard of these treasonous remarks and demanded she be brought before the court. Her husband and powerful family came to her defense, and so she was not killed, but was sent to live with her brother in around 1625, on the condition that she stop her teaching.

However, she soon fled him, taking the same nuns and servants, and moved from Lake Tana to the region of Waldebba, about 150 miles north, which was then drawing many monks and nuns who refused to convert and were fomenting against the new religion. While there, Walatta Petros had a vision of Christ commissioning her to found seven religious communities, a charge she only reluctantly took up. She left and went to the region of Şallamt, east of Waldebba, and again began preaching against conversion. The angry king again called her before the court, and this time she was sentenced to spending Saturdays with the Jesuits, as the head of

the mission, Afonso Mendes, worked to convert her. I continue to wonder what this moment was like, when on Saturdays, the Jesuits were together with Walatta Petros working through the day. I can imagine the Jesuits sitting at a grand table with Walatta Petros and her followers, learning and getting to know one another. Perhaps they fought over whose faith was more “right.” Maybe they were defensive and namebashed one another. Maybe as the Saturdays came and went, the Jesuits and Habasas learned more about themselves, and learned something concerning life they had not known.

Ultimately, sentencing Walatta Petros to spending Saturdays with the Jesuits in hopes to convert her was unsuccessful. The king banishes her, alone, to the Ethio-Sudan borderlands, to a place called Zabay, a hot and barren place. There she endured many hardships, but many monks and nuns who did not want to convert found her and became members of her community. Due to the kindness of the queen, Eheta Krestos was allowed to join her. Thus, Zabay was the first of the seven communities prophesied. After three years the king relented his sentencing and Walatta Petros went with her followers to live in the region of Dambeya, on the northern side of Lake Tana, setting up her second community, named Canq’wa. More men and women followed her there, and when sickness broke out, she moved

her followers to MYelle, on the southeastern shore, becoming her third community.

Finally, in 1632, fifteen years after Walatta Petros had become a nun, a disheartened Susenyos rescinded the conversion edict and died just a few months later. Walatta Petros was revered as a heroine for her resistance to early European incursions in Africa. For the next ten years, Walatta Petros's community continued to grow and the next king, Fasiladas, looked on her with great favor. She set up her communities at Damboza, Afar Faras, Zage, and Zabol. Then, after a three-month illness, she died, twenty-six years after she had become a nun, and was buried at the monastery on Lake Tana.

In 1650, Fasiladas gave land to establish her monastery at Q'araşa, on Lake Tana, which remains her monastery today. Walatta Petros's fame continued to grow over the next century, and her monastery became an important sanctuary for those fleeing the wrath of the king, for whom she performed many miracles, as recorded in her hagiography.

Walatta Petros and her demonstration of resistance was neither fight nor flight. She was resilient and her's was a demonstration of intervention during a time of conflict. She provided a great people in need sanctuary when their livelihood was a stake. In

Walatta Petros' response to conflict, she did not stir or invite violence. When people's lives were in danger, when the king demanded she come to him so that he can eliminate the threat, she came and was willing to sacrifice herself. This daughter of St. Peter paints for us a pathway to peaceful, non-violent reconciliation, where dignity and honor might be restored. The life and work of Walatta Petros sets the stage for today's peoples who desire to resist in a life-giving and -sustaining manner. Her means of resistance is one that gives life to the likes of STAR, *Strategies for Traumatic Awareness and Resilience*.

STAR emerged in the aftermath of 9/11. In the wake of the attacks, Church World Service provided a grant to Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP) to support community leaders dealing with impacted communities. This Center is home to educational programs that prepare leaders to transform violence and injustice. Rather than providing direct services for those who have experienced violence, the program is created to educate community leaders about trauma caused by collective violence. Nearly twenty years later, STAR has worked with people from more than 60 countries and conducted trainings in more than 20 countries. It's interesting that STAR doesn't use resistance in its language. STAR is built on resilience and defines it as 'the capacity of individuals and communities to adapt, survive and bounce

back in the midst of, or after, hardship and adversity. STAR searches for evidence of resilience, not in the absence of traumatic response, but in the quality of relationships with self, other individuals, families and communities in the wake, or midst, of traumagenic events. STAR aims to create and sustain a decolonised, welcoming, inclusive environment for all kinds of spiritual practice, while acknowledging current and historical traumas intertwined with religion and spirituality.

STAR makes it possible for people today like Sharon Morgan and Tom DeWolf to meet and journey together. Sharon is a black woman from Chicago's south side who avoids white people. They scare her. Despite her trepidation, Morgan, a descendant of slaves on both sides of her family, began a journey toward racial reconciliation with DeWolf. Thomas is a white man from rural Oregon who descends from the largest slave-trading dynasty in US history. These two come from two opposing positions in the racial divide, and "Gather at the Table" in an attempt to reconcile the differences that have divided them. Over a three-year period, the two travel thousands of miles, both overseas and through twenty-seven states, visiting ancestral towns, courthouses, cemeteries, plantations, antebellum mansions, and historic sites. In the beginning of the journey, they seemed to be two squabbling adolescents, petulantly pursuing their own agendas. But the

two keep at it, leading and following, following and leading the other. They struggle together, sharing intimate truths and realities that often go unspoken. They go into countless spaces they ordinarily would never find themselves in more than hundreds of years. In their vulnerability, though, both find a shared experience that each of us share. A common ground that brings us all together.

Apart from the geographical journey that DeWolf and Morgan undertake, much of their work is spent in sharing food. It is important to both of them that each returns to the other's home base, be it with relatives or friends, to share the foods that are important to each other's cultures. I found it one of the most moving aspects of their journey: how they prepared meals for the other and made a point of being vulnerable to each other in this most fundamental way. Across the table, as bread is broken, their "enemies defences" are broken down while also ingesting the truest part of themselves and each other.

I am deeply moved by Morgan and DeWolf's journey and cannot stress enough how it affected me: I have come away, knowing for certain that if truth and reconciliation is to happen in a meaningful way, with any race, we must all gather at a common table and be prepared to listen to the other's

story; and be prepared to be changed by their story. Their journey really gives me the sense that it's not our truths that will lead to unity. Rather, it is our honesty and vulnerability that will lead us to Truth.

For hundreds of thousands of years, the fundamental directive for our species has been driven by our need to gather around the table communally to find nourishment. It is in our blood. Our DNA directs us; our psyches inform us. We are at our best, as a species, when we work toward a common goal and consume the fruits of that labour. At the Table we laugh, cry, we imagine and remember all the while gaining a greater understanding of our great need for the other. If we dare break bread and share space at the Table with our "enemies" we are allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to knowing new life. To "gather at the table" is a movement that will make all the difference in our life, we just have to show courage and bravery like that of Walatta Petros, Sharon Morgan and Tom DeWolf. This journey can be painful and ugly. It can feel as if we are being torn apart. In the end, what we share together at the table might provide us the healing nourishment we all need to live rich and full lives. Amen

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