8.12.2020 Midweek Meditation, Week 9 Pastor Timothy McKenzie
Mark 5:1-17, Galatians 3:23-29 (series: Gal. 3:28) (R. S. Sugirtharajah)

# "The Voice of the Voiceless"

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ*. Amen.

When I was in seminary I learned the tools of the historical-critical method for helping establish textual meaning; understanding the historical and social backgrounds of the biblical text; examining the language, philology and semantics of the text; and doing the exegesis that leads to proclamation. The historical-critical method grew out of the Enlightenment, but had its roots in the earlier Reformation era and its Humanism that led to renewed interest in the biblical text and its translation into local languages by theologians and intellectuals such as Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther. For Martin Luther, translation of biblical texts from the original languages was meant to allow late-medieval Christians free access to the text without the intermediary of religious hierarchy. Coupled with Luther's educational reforms, and public education for children, reading the Bible in German translation was a way to individual and thoughtful personhood that most people today take for granted. Being able to read and interpret the Bible in one's own language is an incredible gift of great value. The rub comes in allowing others to read biblical texts, allowing for the same freedom that reformers like Luther sought.

Today the term "postcolonialism" is an accepted field of theological and academic discourse. Twenty years ago, however, R. S. Sugirtharajah wrote that, though it was a new and contentious term, "it has successfully brought to the hermeneutical agenda the overlapping issues of race, empire, diaspora, and ethnicity" (*Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism*, 1998, p. 15). Unlike many other fields of hermeneutical discourse that have developed in and out of the experience of the West, Sugirtharajah writes "postcolonial discourse is not about the West, but about the colonized 'Other'" (1998:16). It is about acquiring a new identity and the liberation of independence from a colonial past and its patterns of control that sought to both define the "Other" and define the West through the existence of the Other. Sugirtharajah writes that postcolonial discourse is about investigating

> hegemonic systems of thought, textual codes, and symbolic practices which the West constructed in its domination of colonial subjects…The interpretation will emerge from people who once were colonized by European powers – or in the case of Korea, by imperial Japan – but who now have some political freedom, while continuing to live with burdens from the past and experiencing forms of economic and cultural neocolonialism (1998:17).

My missionary experience working in a country that was both the subject of Western colonial power and as well as a colonizing force in Asia demonstrated to me how historical "memory" around colonial structures is not simply a part of the historical past, but continues to live within the consciousness of nations, impacting even contemporary diplomatic relations between nations. The voices of those who were subjected to colonial power, colonized, or who continue to live under the legacy of these systemic power structures have a message and witness to make that can be learned from only if we are able to listen. Only in recognizing that some are not truly free, but remain oppressed by a shared history of Western colonialism is an opportunity to be renewed by the biblical view of humanity and nations, which is very different than the ideas about race that I grew up with. The Bible has no word for "race," but rather speaks of "peoples," "nations," and "ethnicity." Biblically there is only one "race" – the human race. It is a sign of our broken human sinfulness that we find it difficult to always see in our neighbor, the face of Christ, who became fully human so that we might see God's glory in human form.

Addressing the issue of voice, who gets to speak, and who gets to interpret, Sugirtarajah writes

“Postcolonial interpretation recognizes that interpreters have to be freed from traditional interpretive powers so that the voice of the voiceless may be heard” (1998:18). I never realized the importance of a “voice” is until I lost my own “voice” through sheer illiteracy at the start of my own time in Japan. I had to learn Japanese – speaking, reading, and writing, so that my own voice might join the conversation in the life of the church where I had been called to work. Though I eventually earned a Ph.D. in the area of prewar Japanese religious and political history, and actively used Japanese for daily research and teaching, I was always conscious that my own voice was not Japanese. I could never speak for, interpret policy for, or represent on behalf of a Japanese perspective.

This realization was impressed upon me with great and embarrassing force one summer, before returning to graduate school, when I was *requested by* ELCA global mission leadership to interpret (code word for “to talk about”) the church in Japan at a Lutheran conference in Chicago. I was preceded by a church leader from Africa, who spoke about the church in his country from his perspective as an African. After concluding my remarks, though I had attempted to be sensitive to the issue of not being Japanese, I was nevertheless taken to task by my co-presenter, in front of several hundred people, for speaking – giving voice – for a church that should have been able to speak for itself. It was an instructive lesson that I shall never forget about the difficulty of speaking in the place of another. This is especially true in the field of global mission where the legacy of five centuries of Western colonial hegemony has made it difficult to be freed from ongoing use of neocolonial power.

If we are to truly be the body of Christ that is “neither Jew nor Greek,” African, American, Asian, or European, but rather “one in Christ” (Gal. 3:28), we need to relearn again and again how to truly listen to the voice of the other, so that they are no longer the “Other,” but rather, *another* sister and brother in Christ. It may mean learning to be quiet so that through another sharing of their experience, we hear the voice of Christ in their voice, no matter how uncomfortable and painful that may be for those who have tacit and assumed power. We need one another in all of our diversity because that is the way the God has created us. We need one another because we all benefit from sisters and brothers who read God’s word from their own linguistic and cultural perspective.

I used to represent the ELCA missionary association at national church meetings in Tokyo (which has its own postcolonial baggage), and I remember a conversation with a senior representative of the Danish Missionary Society. This person began as a career missionary in Africa, and after many years of work returned to Denmark, becoming a church diplomat. Though I no longer remember the context of his remark, he said that at the end of his service in Africa, an African church leader with whom he had worked said to his Danish boss, “You may have him back, we have trained him for you.” I have never forgotten this remark, because it has also been my experience. I was led in the Christian faith as an adult in another language, another culture, and learned that God’s word is interpreted and effectively proclaimed in that context using the contextual, cultural, and religious signs and symbols of that place.

This series has only a few more weeks, but it has been motivated by our own ongoing conversation about postcolonial power and race in this nation. It is not an easy conversation, and one that can feel tiring. The story of the Gerasene demoniac has been on my mind. We live in a world possessed by many competing voices, a legion of voices. It is helpful for me to remember Jesus freed the man possessed by voices, restoring him to sanity. I think one of the reasons this has been on my mind is that only in the encounter with Christ are we freed from the demonic voices of our past that continue to attempt to possess our present and our future. To be “one in Christ” is to hear the voice of Christ in our sisters and brothers, even when and especially when, their voices demand we be freed from demons of the past that continue to possess our present, so that we might be made whole for a future together in Christ. Amen.

**Week 9 midweek meditation readings:**

(Excerpts) *"Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism"* by R. S. Sugirtharajah [from p. 123]

### Cultures, Texts, Margins

I would like to begin by sharing with you two texts, both from colonial narratives. The first is from the Church Missionary Society *Register* of 1818 and concerns a conversation between a group of Indians who had gathered around a tree outside Delhi, and a Christian catechist named Anund Messeh. Seeing that these people had Gospel portions with them, Anund tells one of the elderly men, "These books teach the religion of the European Sahibs. It is THEIR book; and they printed it in our language, for our use." In the ensuing conversation, the elderly man replies, "That is true; but how can it be the European Book, when we believe that it is God's gift to us? He sent it to us at Hurdwar. God gave it long ago to the Sahibs, and THEY sent it to us" (Fisher 1818:18).

The second comes from a children's novel, *The History of Little Henry and His Bearer*, by Martha Mary Sherwood, who engaged in evangelical-educational work in India during the colonial days. Sherwood's work epitomizes the vast quantity of children's literature produced before the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny that was influential in forming colonial attitudes and shaping colonial narratives. *The History of Little Henry and His Bearer* is a moral tale about a scripture-quoting Anglo-Indian, Henry L., aged seven or eight, and his attempts to convert his Indian bearer called Boosy. In one scene of Henry and Boosy traveling to Calcutta, little Henry observes:

> Boosy, this is a good country: that is, it would be a very good country, if the people were Christians. Then they would not be so idle as they are now: and they would agree together and clear the jungles, and build churches to worship God in. It will be pleasant to see people, when they are Christians, all going on a Sunday morning to some fair church built among those hills, and to see them in an evening sitting at the door of their houses reading the *shaster* – I do not mean your *shaster*, but our *shaster*, God's book. (1821:76-77).

I recount these two narratives to reiterate the point that, although the Bible originated in west Asia, when it was received in and introduced to the rest of the continent it was seen as an alien text. Thus an Asian Christian reading of the Bible has never been an easy, natural reading…

### Colonial Tools and Hermeneutical Wars

As readers we first cut our hermeneutical teeth with colonial methods. When I first started as a theological student, the methods bequeathed to us by Western teachers consisted of various forms of historical criticism. At that time redaction criticism was seen as a major breakthrough. Later, over the years, other approaches such as social science, poststructuralism, narrative theories, and deconstruction were added to the repertoire. Why do I label these supposedly inoffensive and innocent methods colonial? They are colonial not only in origination, style, content, execution, and ideology, but also in the sense that they were used to reshape our minds. Cultural critics have recently been telling us that the lasting effect of imperialism was not only its political subjugation of people or the economic or ecological devastation it caused, but the ideological and cultural vision it implanted among subjugated people. The famous minute that T. B. Macaulay wrote in 1835 on how to educate Indians is a testimony to colonial intentions to control culturally the minds of Indians:

> We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. (Young 1935:359)

In other words, much more than territorial and political domination, it was the intellectual and cultural control of the natives which was effective in sustaining colonialism, and also of course in perpetuating its motifs and forms in the postcolonial context…

Colonialism is not simply a system of economic and military control, but a systematic cultural penetration and domination. Most damaging is not the historical, political, and economic domination, but the psychological, intellectual, and cultural colonization. Hence, historical-critical methods were not only colonial in the sense that they displaced the norms and practices of our indigenous reading methods, but in that they were used to justify the superiority of Christian texts and to undermine the sacred writings of others, thus creating a division between us and our neighbors. Such materials function as masks for exploitation and abet an involuntary cultural assimilation.

These methods are colonial because they insist that a right reading is mediated through the proper use of historical-critical tools alone. For example, look at the opening lines of George Strecker's *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary* (1988): "No proper exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount can ignore the results of more than two hundred years of historical-critical research into the New Testament." The statement at the outset rules out the right of the reader or an interpreter to use any other means to understand the text, and those who do not practice these methods are outside the circle. The implication is that the Western academy sets the ground rules for interpretation and defines what tools shall be used, and these tools are paraded as universally applicable in opening the biblical text. Anyone who does not employ them or does not engage with them is an outcast. The inference is that any culturally informed reading by a Ghandi, a Tilak, or a Krishna Pillai is ruled out. In other words, a culturally diversified approach will never get a look. The West not only provides the tools but it also controls our textual preferences. What the Indian social scientist Ashis Nandy said about colonialism applies equally to biblical interpretation: "The West has not merely produced modern colonialism, it informs most interpretations of colonialism. It colors even the interpretation of interpretation. (1991:xii)…

Once the rules have been established, those who fail to follow them are seen as outcasts, outside the system. They are not regarded as doing proper exegesis. The methods are colonial because they would have us believe that they have universal validity and significance, although they emerged as a contextual response to the specific needs of Western academies. Essentially they are symbols and products of Western culture. What is colonial is the assumption and claim Western scholars make that their work is universal, comprehensive, and exhaustive. A tacit assumption exists among Western biblical interpreters that their exegetical works and literary productions on the Bible speak for all and cover the concerns of Asia, Africa, and Latin America…

**Reading recommendations:**
R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998.
R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Asia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.
R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Jesus in Asia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018.

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