

## Sermon – Multiculturalism Matthew 12: 22-32 – Cláudio Carvalhaes

22 Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute; and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see.

23 All the crowds were amazed and said, 'Can this be the Son of David?'

24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.'

25 He knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.

26 If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?

27 If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.

29 Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his property, without first tying up the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered.

30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

31 Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

32 Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

May the peace of Christ be with you. This is the last worship service I preach and lead here at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, a place that I learned to love and care about deeply. I am very thankful to God, thankful to president Dean Thompson for my time here, especially my three first years, which were a wonderful time, a time made of trust and possibilities to work together in the midst of differences. I am mourning my leaving LPTS and the people I learned to love dearly. I pray for you and I ask you to pray for me. It is time to take my shoe shining box and move to Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia next year.

Our gospel text today talks about issues of power, authority, authenticity, who belongs where and the ways we try to portray one another. It is not an easy text, it is not used in the lectionary, and I am still trying to grasp its possibilities. Let us see. At the beginning of this chapter we see Pharisees checking on Jesus about his disciples' behavior. They were doing unlawful things during the Sabbath and that was clearly against the law. Jesus replied to them remembering that David had also done unlawful things like going into the house of God with his friends and eating the bread they were not supposed to eat. The logic of Jesus was grounded in the fact that the temple, bread, and Sabbath were to serve people and not the other way around. Jesus told them that there were things greater than our traditions. Times and people change, so God's revelation to us, so traditions.

Later on in the chapter, our text for today, we see the Pharisees checking on Jesus again. This time, Jesus heals a person who is possessed by a demon. And they accused Jesus by saying he was doing it by the power of “Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.” Here is the conundrum: one can only cure people by the power of God OR Beelzebul. So, what side would Jesus be on?

Jesus was not considered to be fully on the side of official religion. So the result is that he was placed on the side of Beelzebul, the Devil. So Jesus had to take them using their own logic. If Jesus was casting out demons by a different source than God, than he was from Beelzebul. How could Jesus be from Beelzebul and cast out demons? That is why he uses the metaphor of a house that stands together because all the people inside work for and from the same source. Jesus has to undo the Pharisees discourse and his reasoning shifts power dynamics and where Jesus himself stands. Jesus authenticates his own source of power and his belonging, threatening them with blasphemy, the one unforgivable sin.

In and around these theological engagements lies a problem of power. It has to do again with belonging, authenticity and naming the other. Jesus seems to be very close to the official religion but because he confuses the powers that be, twisting its clean-cut self-determined truths, playing with parables, metaphors, unruly theological interpretations and social behavior he is defined as an-other. He scares them all. Jesus is tried time and time again. Even in his death he is asked: “Are you the king of Jews?”

Throughout Jesus’ life, Jesus’ power, belonging and authenticity are always questioned. The theological move of the official religion seems to be the unsettling of Jesus’ belonging, the questioning of his abilities and marking him with the stamp of irresponsibility and unauthenticity.

The unsettling, questioning and marking off of an-other has been part of our human moves against those we don’t understand or fear. And this strategy of demonizing a strange other who does not belong to the proper religion is everywhere in the history of Christianity. Blind, mute, disabled, leper, poor, women and widows join Jews, blacks, gay people, immigrants and foreigners... all of them more often than not demonized so there will be a reason to either separate, ostracize, kill or at least send them away, outside of the proper gates of the city.

The history of the Christian faith has so many instances like this one where those who scare/offend/shock/shake/move/unsettle/anger the official discourse are regarded as agents of Beelzebul. Sometimes in the Christian history the naming of the other as Beelzebul is very clear and sometimes the checking of the belonging and authenticity of the other are sophisticated ways that regard the other not as the Devil but agents of Beelzebul.

There is still today a very nice theological “Beelzebulization” going on in our churches and seminaries and denominations. One way of making this theological

“Beelzebulization” happen is when those who hold power understand the Christian faith as the one, only and **proper** *historical-cultural* faith without considering *other historical-cultural* faith as acceptable theological accounts to live **within** this proper discourse.

Let me explain that with a case: let us take the movement of the Presbyterian tradition. In very large paintbrushes, we can say that the Reformed faith went from Geneva to Scotland and from Scotland to United States. People, culture and their theological and liturgical resources came from Geneva, Scotland and ended up structuring the proper historically-culturally informed reformed faith in US. That means that, the theological and liturgical resources of the Presbyterian church were deeply marked and influenced by this missiological route. In liturgical terms, the book of common worship is a beautiful Geneva-Scotland-US document. Hymns, prayers, sermon, worship space, sacraments, order of worship, movements of the body, everything had and still has a Geneva-Scotland-US stamp on it. These resources composed the very center of the proper theological-liturgical practices of the Presbyterian church.

When US Presbyterian missionaries went to Brazil in 1859, they also brought songs and liturgies that were lived and performed in United States and Scotland.

So much so that the hymn that most influenced my early teenager years was a Scottish hymn we sang in church even tough I had never heard of Scotland. I found this hymn in a Scottish hymnal and it goes like this: SING “Finda-se este dia...”

Today, I will honor those who lived their reformed faith and brought their love to my country, my family and to me, either directly or indirectly. – **UNROBE AND SHOW THE SCOTISH GARMENT**. As you see, I love Scotland. I am a fruit of Scottish people! What I have learned is that, perhaps by mimicking what I have received and posing as a tamed savage, a well behaved colonized male latin-lover, and by staying within the proper bounds and not touching people, I can gain bonus points with the ones who own the Presbyterian church today and they may let me stay inside.

Well, the main problem here is that, while the Christian faith was in the hands of people from Geneva, Scotland and the United States, it was as if the Reformed faith was considered pure, legitimate, dignified, proper. But then, when the gospel went to the South of the world and left the “axis of the proper,” the new indigenous people could not live up to its task. They screwed it all up. As much as they tried, wearing suits in a 100 degree weather, abandoning their games and dances and their sexualized bodies, they still couldn’t get tradition all together. They were always off of the mark. In a word: unauthentic.

Still, it was ok while they remained in their own countries. The problem happened when they started to come to the United States.

These im-proper people arrived in US and started doing backward missionary work, reverse anthropology, anticolonized theologies and improper liturgical moves,

messing up the proper reformed faith of the proper reformed churches. What then were the receiving churches supposed to do with these UGA-UGA colored people that along with black people, women and gay people, were pushing the boundaries of the religious proper?

One way to respond to it was to embrace them under the banner of the white male Liberal Protestantism which was a perfect background to appropriate the powerful cultural movements that were going on in the 80's and they created the slogan "A Multicultural Church." Then we learned and institutionalized "Kumbaya My Lord" and we knew we were a multicultural church.

Multiculturalism was the ideal umbrella under which the church would open up space for difference and accommodate strangers into the midst of the white church, making the church Brownish. However, as we have it today, multiculturalism has not lived up to its ideals and instead, became a movement of tokenism. Here the system allows the fringes to dance just a little bit around the center. It is a display, giving outsiders the impression that they can handle these people and that they are truly part of the real center.

It went this way: mainline protestant churches gave brown people an office, couple jobs, some money, a little ink, and made this diverse people feel that the church is getting there. In very few and slow ways, it is getting there.

So much so that I am here! Well... not for too long. I have also become a token in some ways and the work of difference is still an illusion brothers and sisters, an illusion to make us all happy. At the end of the day, while we all sing Kumbaya, the structures of power and sameness are all still in place and we continue to fight for diversity without much success. While Multiculturalism might have begun with good intentions, at the end of the day, a suspicion arises: did the structures of power engage difference as a way for ensuring that it would remain the same? Was diversity welcomed so as to preserve a dominant uniformity? As professor Christopher Elwood said once: "we Calvinists are very suspicious of power!"

Let me tell you an old joke about communist times that I heard in Latin America and was recently remembered by Slavoj Zizek in Occupy Wall Street movement. This joke can help us understand our present time in regards to religion as well:

"A guy was sent from East Germany to work in Siberia. He knew censors read his letters so he told his friends. Let us establish a code. If the letter you get from me is in blue ink is true. If it is written in red it is false. After a month his friends get his first letter. Everything is in blue. It says in the letter: Everything is wonderful here. Stores are full of good food, movie theaters show good films from the west. Apartments are large and luxurious. The only thing you cannot buy is red ink."

Zizek says: "We have all the freedom we want. But what we are missing is red ink, the language to articulate our own freedom. The way we are taught to speak about freedom, war, terror and so on, falsifies freedom, and this is what we are doing here."

The occupying movement everywhere is giving all of us red ink! What matters is what we will do later on... We don't live in the best times and there is a long walk ahead of us and terrible questions..." What world do we want brothers and sisters? What kind of church and color do we want? What kind of power dynamics do we hope for?

Brothers and sisters, our lives with God have been privatized into somebody else's faith. The one proper historical-cultural faith of white male protestant liberalism has become our only resource. And our own theological and liturgical ways of living the Christian faith are often *beelzebulized*, and we are often checked to see if we belong, if we are authentic, if we are responsible.

The white liberal Protestantism, which we are all part of, is increasing its control of power, keeping us away from power decisions, kidnapping our global liturgies, freezing our bodily movements and denying our indigenous gestures, while making us into *adiaphora*, a theological term for **"things not essential."** Mimicking is what we were left with...

By diluting our own faith into their own proper resources, we lose our abilities and competencies.

By reprimanding us not to use liturgical practices that are not in the books of common worship, we continue to be unabashedly colonized. I am not against the books of common worship they are precious and very important. But we cannot live off of that one single resource only!

We continue to be taught how to behave properly, our bodies continue to be controlled, our minds continue to be washed. We continue to learn what and how to teach. We continue to be accused of crossing lines, and we hear we love what you do, but please tame our unauthentic worshipful experiences!

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Brothers and sisters, we need to hear Jesus who said "No city or house divided against itself will stand." Our house is deeply divided right now. The result is that we are all dying. I read somewhere that if all of the Presbyterian seminaries were to close their doors today, we would have enough candidates for ministry for the next 10 years. Because we don't have enough churches...

And yet, we still cannot be courageous enough to open up our *oikos*, our house, our theologies, our liturgies, and our hearts to the encounter of others. It is indeed easier to work with D2D, different religions than within our own Christian differences. The difficult thing is to stay and work together with Christians who stay here for one, two, three, even five years! It seems that we cannot work under the guidance of the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit is free... Besides, this house, this

*oikos, this oikoumene*, is first and foremost God's own *oikos*, and God is the one who issues the invitation and welcomes those who gather and those who seem to scatter!

We cannot let others cast out demons in their own ways. Every time they do it, we call them Beelzebul... Like the text says, we have become each other's judges instead of becoming each other's brothers and sisters. If we continue this way, we will die as righteous people saying: we are dead but we saved the gospel of Jesus Christ from other fake, dangerous, unauthentic Christian enemies.

So, how can we figure out what hospitality means here, in a world of multicultural tokenism? Usually, we offer that which we don't have and want to have. Hospitality in some places can mean: we welcome you here UNTIL you start to annoy us. If you start to annoy us too much we will make it very uncomfortable for you to stay...

For I now call upon the 99% of those in theological education. RESIST!

- Let us not let anyone privatize and take over our faith. NO! Instead, along with the books of common worship they give us, let us use other discourses, your own discourses, from your own resources! Embrace other people's traditions from other places, engage with a global and vast array of liturgical practices the same way that you learn to do in your Bible exegesis and theology classes. Make this worship space as complicated as the world is! And don't let anyone shut you down!

Jesus, who is all in all, is the head of this house, with many rooms. We must follow Jesus and say that those who scatter are NOT from Beelzebul but instead, they are full inhabitants of this house! A house that God owns, not us! We must resist under the power of the Holy Spirit brother and sisters!

Otherwise, our common house under Jesus Christ will continue to collapse, until we all die.

Let us sing!