

# Troubled Gospel: Postcolonial Preaching for the Colonized, Colonizer, and Everyone in Between

Sarah Travis

Knox College/Toronto School of Theology, Toronto, Canada

**Abstract:** *The task of preaching is imbedded in a world that has been shaped by colonialism and imperialism. Preaching in North America will benefit from an engagement with postcolonial theory and a process of decolonization. This process, however, is a significant challenge for white, wealthy western preachers whose own position vis a vis colonialism is somewhat ambiguous. Most preachers in the West are both perpetrators of imperial projects, and simultaneously oppressed by these very systems. Is it possible for such preachers to participate in a process of decolonization? This article argues that it is possible, although preachers must attend to issues such as social location, neocolonizing anticolonialism, and the experiences of those with deeper knowledge of the realities of colonialism.*

*Another key question is the manner in which the proclamation of the gospel is affected by the process of decolonizing preaching. Is a decolonized gospel good news for those who have benefited from colonial and imperial projects? At first, such a gospel may sound like bad news, as it involves a voluntary surrender of power and a willingness to occupy a marginal space. The truly good news is found in the promise of freedom from oppressive systems in which all are caught. Postcolonial preaching problematizes “gospel,” yet ultimately offers both preachers and listeners a way to escape destructive social systems.*

## Introduction

The world today has been shaped to a large degree by western colonial and imperial influences. Postcolonial criticism *highlights historical and contemporary manifestations of colonialism, imperialism and empire as they affect culture, politics, religion, economics and other realms of life.* I find the following definition of empire to be particularly helpful for homiletic reflection. Empire is:

a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world. . . constituted by a reality and a spirit of lordless domination, created by humankind. An all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while exploiting creation, imperiously excludes, enslaves and even sacrifices humanity.<sup>1</sup>

Here I am imagining empire to be an often invisible framework on which our lives are built, and within which our identities are constructed. My previous work has been concerned with decolonizing preaching in Canada and the United States. To decolonize preaching is to recognize and resist the forces of empire which have shaped human communities in the past and present, and to reorient Christian community and identity toward a vision of human community more aligned with God’s own nature. I believe that this is an essential task, yet I confess a certain sheepishness when I disclose the subject of my academic inquiry. My social location has much more in common with “colonizers” than the “colonized.” This is also true for many of those

---

<sup>1</sup> Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, and Charles Amjad-Ali, eds., *Dreaming a Different World* (Stellenbosch: The Globalization Project, 2010), 2.

among whom I preach and teach. Except for the very occasional experience of discrimination due to my gender, I have not known marginalization—professional or otherwise. My household income is largely provided by two organizations historically implicated in colonial processes—the church, and a major Railway company with whom my husband is employed. I continue to wonder if my temerity to address this subject might not be justly considered presumptuous, even impertinent, by those whose lives have been more obviously shaped by the domination of the “west over the rest.” Similar questions have been asked regarding the development of postcolonial theories themselves, which have predominantly arisen from within the western Academy. This paper ponders the challenge and the necessity of decolonizing preaching, specifically in contexts in which the preacher and a majority of listeners are white, affluent and of European heritage. I draw on some of the critical conversations occurring within postcolonial scholarship in order to inform postcolonial preaching.

Preachers who share my cultural and social background have been, or are perceived to have been, perpetrators, victims and observers of the work of empire. I maintain, however, that white, affluent preachers are called to participate in a process of decolonizing preaching. But how should we proceed—with what posture and with what attitude? Can the white preacher who is bound up in a colonial past and present say anything at all with authority and credibility? If we can speak, if we can participate in this process, what is the good news of a decolonized sermon for those who benefit from imperial hierarchies? A postcolonial perspective problematizes “gospel” in a number of ways. By reflecting upon the possibilities and limitations of postcolonial preaching in contexts which are primarily white and affluent, I hope to find a space for those who benefit from empire to participate in the process of decolonization.

### **Imagining the Postcolonial Sermon**

The space of our worship and preaching is a space in the midst of empire. In the early twenty-first century, Christians in Canada and the United States exist in a state of continuity and discontinuity with an imperial past. In brief, this means that the modern movements such as colonialism, imperialism and globalization have resulted in the distribution of people and goods across the globe, and have thus shaped populations, cultures, economies and the distribution of power. The consequences are negative and positive—similar processes have led to both a lovely diversity in the North American population, and racial tension. A postcolonial homiletic approach identifies and names empire as a shared historical and contemporary context. This approach searches scriptures, histories, congregations, preachers, social media, and the church for the presence of empire and signs of colonizing discourse. Distinguished from “colonial discourse theory,” colonizing discourse describes the words and actions of those in positions of relative power who seek to dominate others, create separation between different groups, homogenize difference and essentialize identities. These categories describe the actions of historical colonial powers in their relationship with colonized persons, yet the term is useful also to describe ways that “others” are marginalized and kept in subservient positions. Colonizing discourse occurs in speech, behavior, policy, and action, and is thus both discursive and material. Examples include policies of separation such as apartheid, and political rhetoric which claims cultural superiority for one nation over another. Homiletic examples include preaching that ignores the diversity of listeners, or sermons that inaccurately represent particular cultural groups.

Preaching is a theological task that names God’s action in the world. Thus, postcolonial preaching disputes and/or resists colonizing discourse by casting an alternative vision of human

community rooted in careful theological reflection. I believe that the Trinity is a useful starting point for theological reflection regarding colonialism and imperialism. The task of decolonizing preaching is a difficult one, and will lead many preachers and listeners far out of their comfort zone. By pairing a somewhat radical postcolonial perspective with a mainstream theological concept such as the Trinity, preachers and listeners may be more easily able to locate themselves within the conversation. Traditional views of the Trinity have often served to support hierarchy and violence within the human community. Despite the centrality of the Trinity for many Christian traditions, it remains a patriarchal and troubling concept, vulnerable to interpretations that are more destructive than constructive. However, some of the concepts of the Social doctrine of the Trinity, especially as envisioned by Jürgen Moltmann, constitute an interesting juxtaposition to more traditional views. While it remains an imperfect vision of God's nature, the Social Trinity perceives God to be an interrelated system in which Father, Son and Spirit exist in a non-hierarchical fellowship characterized by mutual indwelling, tolerance of difference, and openness to one another and the whole created order. In this sense, the very nature of God is a witness against colonialism. If human community in *imago trinitatis* emulates this divine community, then it too will seek to be free from domination, encourage mutual self-giving, tolerant of difference and open to human and divine others. Sermons develop our skill to live in between—as citizens of one empire, created and shaped for life in another, the Kingdom of God. Through a process of interrelation with the Persons of the Trinity, we discover both our identity and our ethics.

### **An Imperialistic Impossibility?**

North American preaching must be decolonized. Preachers, sermons, and the homiletic academy are vulnerable to the destructive influences of colonizing discourse, and may thus negatively impact relationships within the church and beyond. Does an argument for decolonizing preaching sound plausible coming from a privileged, white preacher and scholar?

Theologian Rebecca Todd Peters suggests that it is “an imperialistic impossibility for a white, affluent, Protestant woman” to plea for a postcolonial perspective on the church.<sup>2</sup> I agree that it is an “impossible” task, but paradoxically an unavoidable, even necessary task, for as Peters goes on, “decolonizing the mind is as essential for the colonizer as it is for the colonized.”<sup>3</sup> The systems that underlie colonialism and imperialism, as well as neocolonialism, are ubiquitous and omnipresent. Those with power and those without all exist within the same systems, and to some extent all are held captive, although not in the same way. The powerful live under a subtle bondage, “sufficiently rewarded that we do not notice our lack of freedom.”<sup>4</sup> In working toward a feminist postcolonial theology, Kwok Pui-lan generously makes a space in which all women may participate in the task of decolonizing the mind via postcolonial theology: both the (former) female colonizers and the (former) colonized women are able to do postcolonial theology, although they will have different entry points, priorities of issues, accents, and inflections. I also insist that female subalterns who experience the intersection of oppressions

---

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Todd Peters, “A Decolonizing our Minds: Postcolonial Perspectives on the Church.” In *Women's Voices and Visions*, Letty Russell, Aruna Gnanadason and J. Shannon Clarkson., eds. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), 93.

<sup>3</sup> Todd Peters, 94.

<sup>4</sup> Justo González, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 26.

in the most immediate and brutal way have epistemological privileges in terms of articulating a postcolonial feminist theology that will be more inclusive than others.<sup>5</sup>

When Kwok's words are applied to the homiletic task, all preachers are invited to participate in a postcolonial conversation. It is essential, however, to acknowledge that some preachers and listeners will carry within themselves a much more vivid, accurate and painful portrait of colonial reality based on personal experience. A preacher like me must be quick to acknowledge the limitation of my own experience, and learn from others. Affluent preachers can remember their own social location, and makes space for the needs and experiences of others that are often urgent. In the words of R.S. Sugitharajah,

the task of postcolonialism is to ensure that the yearnings of the poor take precedence over the interests of the affluent; that the emancipation of the subjugated has primacy over the freedom of the powerful; and that the participation of the marginalized takes priority over the perpetuation of system which systematically excludes them.<sup>6</sup>

While there are some commonalities among liberation theologies and postcolonial theologies, there are also differences, including varying emphases on material vs. discursive, home vs. diaspora, grassroots vs. academic theory. Yet the vast homiletical literature stemming from a liberation perspective opens possibilities for the role of the relatively powerful preacher in the process of decolonization. Justo and Catherine González address relatively powerful white, American preachers who preach liberation for the poor and oppressed, and are thus in danger of announcing a gospel for which they themselves have no need: "Precisely because such agents of liberation have never experienced the bondage they now address, it is easy for them to oversimplify the problems and misunderstand the situation, both in its causes and in its cures."<sup>7</sup> Instead, "powerful" preachers are called to recognize the need for liberating gospel in their own lives—not to live out of the experience of the oppressed other, but rather to discover "in what ways he [sic] is oppressed, and learn about how the same system which oppresses others also oppresses the seemingly powerful."<sup>8</sup> A subversion of power roles, in which the "powerful" are taught by those of lesser power, can lead to liberation for the oppressed and the oppressor. Postcolonial preaching cannot happen unless preachers are willing to acknowledge to themselves and to their listeners complicity with imperial systems, the first step in bringing to consciousness the reality that all inhabit colonial spaces.

While it is possible for white affluent preachers and listeners to engage in postcolonial criticism, there are several issues worthy of attention if such postcolonial preaching is to achieve more than a token attempt to be "other-wise." Gayatri Spivak has recognized the impossibility for most scholars to engage in postcolonial or anti-colonial studies without simultaneously inhabiting colonial structures, which she termed "neocolonizing anticolonialism."<sup>9</sup> Those of us within the western academy and churches are inextricably bound up in the structures of empire. Thus, even as we say "no", we continue to benefit from the very thing we are protesting against. Such is the reality for North American preachers today. Regardless of race, ethnicity, gender,

---

<sup>5</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 127.

<sup>6</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations* (London: SCM, 2003), 33.

<sup>7</sup> Justo González and Catherine González, *The Liberating Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 25.

<sup>8</sup> González, *Liberation Preaching*, 52.

<sup>9</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 191. See also Mark Lewis Taylor "Spirit and Liberation."

colonial experience, we all continue to dwell in the midst of empire. This leads to another dangerous possibility. An important task of postcolonial preaching is for preachers to reflect upon their own captivity in empire and need for liberation, as well as that of their listeners. Yet by identifying myself as a captive of empire in need of liberation, do I claim myself as a victim of forces beyond my control and thus absolved of responsibility? It is important to maintain a sense of corporate and individual responsibility for words and behaviors which limit the freedom of others.

There lies the possibility that a postcolonial perspective employed by preachers who have not been consciously marginalized by the colonial process could become just another method of colonization. To employ a theory that has emerged from ivory towers rather than grassroots anti-colonial struggles is to risk defining ourselves and others according to yet another western system of categorization. Even to utter the term “postcolonial” is to be misheard as saying that colonialism is a thing of the past. In a well-known essay, Anne McClintock offers several pertinent critiques of the term postcolonial that are applicable to preaching. She cautions against a “premature celebration of the ‘pastness’ of colonialism.”<sup>10</sup> Many regions of the globe continue to face “imperialism without colonialism,” and many populations continue to experience the profound dehumanization of colonizing discourse. Global citizens do not share a common experience of either colonialism or the postcolonial situation. If indeed we have entered a time in which we are able to reflect critically upon colonialism and imperialism, as termed postcolonialism, my experience of postcoloniality as a white Canadian of English heritage bears little resemblance to the experience of an aboriginal man in Australia, or an American woman of Filipino descent, or a child in Ghana. Even the postcolonial identities of those who share racial, ethnic and/or religious characteristics are highly variant. For example, I have taken for granted in my own preaching that Nelson Mandela is a positive and worthy example of the fight for human rights. One of my listeners, however, a white South African, perceives Mandela as a rebellious, evil man responsible for the loss of her home and resources. When it comes to the aftermath of imperial systems such as apartheid, there are no straightforward answers. Even as postcolonial perspectives are employed in preaching, we must recognize that “postcolonial” is a term that continually undoes itself. Just as we begin to think that we understand the implications of postcolonial reality, we are reminded again how reality resists easy categorization.

Many white North Americans have a limited awareness of colonial history as it has unfolded both overseas and within North America. Perhaps because history has been taught from the perspective of the powerful, even educated adults today may not be conscious of the myriad ways that colonial and imperial realities have affected Canada and the United States, the treatment of aboriginal populations, the founding myths, the experience of immigrants, foreign policy, etc. Because of the social location of many of those among whom I minister, colonialism tends to be heard as a neutral, even positive term. There exists a continuing belief that colonialism has been a necessary duty of powerful and wealthy nations—an act of generosity to care for the poor heathen who has been unable to achieve civilization without assistance. Decolonizing preaching, then, will involve a particular pedagogy and re-telling of the stories of world history, as well as an increased commitment on the part of preachers to interpret current events with a postcolonial lens.

---

<sup>10</sup> Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress.” In *Colonial Discourse, Postcolonial Theory*, by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen., eds. (New York: St. Martins, 1994), 88.

Postcolonial theories continually question the power and authority of the “colonizer.” In that sense, another question arises for affluent preachers. To what extent am I truly “powerful”? While I perceive myself to inhabit a privileged space, I may be suffering from a delusion of power that leads me to believe I have power to change a system over which I am actually entirely powerless.<sup>11</sup> This possibility reinforces the words of the González’s above, pointing to the oppression and bondage of all—rich, poor and middle class, colonized, colonizer and everyone in between. If even “powerful” preachers are “powerless,” then it is all the more necessary to engage the tools of postcolonial theory. We are reminded of the instability of authority and identity in a postcolonial world.

Identity is a key theme for postcolonial inquiry. Rather than viewing identity as fixed and static, postcolonial theorists understand identity to be socially constructed, and thus unstable. Identity is negotiated in the interaction among colonized and colonized persons. A “colonizer” for example, will attempt to inhabit a particular identity that justifies their position and defines them over and against the colonized person. If the colonizer is innately superior, culturally pure, and civilized, then the colonized population is inferior, impure, in need of moral uplift, and savage. Colonial interactions, however, reveal a much more complex reality. If neither colonized or colonizer fit the identity mold assigned by the colonizer, this also calls into question the right of the colonizer to hold power. This concept of fluctuating identities may be good news for preachers like me. Amid the shifting identities in a postcolonial world, my self-conception as colonizer is also set adrift. If identity is indeed fluid and unstable—always being shaped by our interactions— then I am potentially freed from the label “colonizer.” Instead, the postcolonial concept of hybridity allows me to acknowledge that I am not completely one thing or another— I can be both, and, neither. One of the goals of postcolonial criticism is to undermine binary oppositions. Although it is difficult within postcolonial conversations to avoid binaries such as “colonized” and “colonizer,” it is more fruitful to recognize the ambiguous nature of all reality, and talk instead about relative power and privilege; to search our lives for ways that we wield power that results in negative consequences for others.

### **Where Is the Good News?**

Recently I taught a course in an Eastern Canadian seminary entitled “Decolonizing Preaching.” One student, the pastor of a small, rural church in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, had a very challenging question for me. She began by appreciating all that she had learned in the course—the colonial and imperial forces that have shaped the past and continue to shape the present of her congregation, and the value of postcolonial theory for preaching. Despite the pertinence of the topic to her situation, she wondered “How is this good news for my church? How does this function as gospel, especially since my people, in the grand scheme of things, are more closely aligned with colonizers than colonized, yet still suffer from the effects of empire?”

Parts of Eastern Canada have suffered from economic depression as industries such as fishing have declined. These communities often find themselves at the mercy of large corporations headquartered elsewhere, who make decisions about the extraction of natural resources and the allocation of jobs and thus have the power to establish economic security. While dependent on the whims of “empire” for survival, these communities still participate in the larger frames of empire as consumers and voting citizens. Despite the severe economic challenges, these people still have a much better quality of life than much of the world’s population. They occupy land that once belonged to aboriginal peoples. Churches there, as is true

---

<sup>11</sup> Thank you to Pablo A Jiménez for alerting me to this possibility.

in many regions, experience declining membership and a loss of previously held social authority. They are thus powerful, and simultaneously powerless. I offer this as an example of the complexity of the situation of many primarily white congregations.

The recent “Occupy” movement has popularized the language of “the 1%.” While the 1% is, to some extent, held captive by empire and in need of liberation, it also shares responsibility for the suffering of others and are in need of decolonizing. In what way does postcolonial preaching offer good news to those who live in-between: colonized by empire yet willing participants in the imperial processes? The concern raised by this student is extremely important to the task of decolonizing preaching, yet I admit that I faltered when I attempted to respond to her concerns. After all, decolonizing preaching does not initially sound like good news for those who benefit from the empire. A postcolonial perspective on preaching must be accompanied by reflection upon the nature of gospel. What follows are musings about gospel and the application of postcolonial criticism to the practice of preaching.

The colonial process, historically and in the contemporary world, has benefited some and caused suffering for others. What has historically been interpreted as good news has meant trouble for others. In a sermon entitled National Providence, Thomas Fanshaw Middleton said, “The history of Empires is no other than the history of the Providence of God.” This sermon was preached in Calcutta in 1815, deep in the heart of British India. Whether the history of the British in India is a sign of God’s providence might indeed depend on whether one is an agent of the empire or an Indian nationalist. Yet those aligned with colonizers have often viewed the land, resources and persons under their rule to be a gift of God granted to worthy, faithful nations. To draw on a contemporary example, I feel tremendous gratitude toward God for the land on which I live, for the beauty of the landscape around Lake Ontario. Yet I inhabit this land because it was removed from the aboriginal inhabitants who lived here first.

Surely, we must call into question the idea that God has granted wealth and power to some, while relegating others to subservient positions. History has understood God to be on the side of empires, but the gospel of Jesus Christ is concerned with the reversal of power and wealth. However, as liberation theology has struggled with “God is on the side of the poor” so postcolonial preachers must struggle with the too-simple statement “God is on the side of the colonized.” Scripture testifies to the voices of the prophets promising liberation to the oppressed, and calling the oppressors to release the captives. Jesus, in his life and death, is an affront to empire, his words and actions are continually resisting and calling into question the power of Rome and other Powers. The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for colonized persons. It does not initially sound good for colonizers. If we turn again to postcolonial critical thinking, however, we can remember that one of the goals of such criticism is to undermine the binary divisions that create too narrow categories such as colonized and colonizer. All are caught in the web of principalities and powers—some more willingly than others, and some more comfortably than others. To be freed from these systems is good news for everyone. This good news, however, will be experienced in different ways.

This is not to let evil actors off the hook. Colonialism is a human sin, and thus if freedom is to come about for anyone, those who wield the power must undergo a change of attitude and behavior. This repentance, *metanoia*, is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet these are rarely the words that we long to hear. To preach the end of colonialism is to preach the end of the world as we know it, the end of the status quo.

To let go of power, influence and authority is not only to let go of the habits and lifestyle to which we have been accustomed, but also to become vulnerable. Even to acknowledge that we

are not as powerful as we think we are. White, protestant, affluent Christians have long been at the centre of society in the United States and Canada. To preach a gospel that defies the strict hierarchy of empire is to become decentred. This decentring is already a fear and concern for mainline churches experiencing shrinking membership, budgets and decreased social authority. This process of decolonizing limits our own power in order to make space for others who currently occupy more marginal positions—those of other religions, races, and economic strata. All of this might not sound like good news. To proclaim an alternative vision might mean that we are preaching the end of ourselves, dethroning ourselves. The news gets worse before it gets better. Coming to terms with colonialism and imperialism in the past and present involves taking a cold hard look at the role of the Church in these systems, historically and in the contemporary world. Indeed, as we discover our own complicity—conscious and unconscious, personal and corporate—we will likely feel uncomfortable in our own skin, as well as in the pulpit and pew.

The challenge of finding good news in decolonization is further complicated by the reality that we cannot ever fully be extracted from these systems. Another of my students, struggling with the implications of trying to disentangle from colonial systems, remarked “it’s like the snake that eats its own tail.” That is, once one has untangled one thread of empire, it becomes clear that there are more threads waiting. Think about what happens if we try to remove ourselves from a particular consumer cycle by refusing to buy clothing created in unsafe factories in the developing world. What happens to those employees if production decreases? How do we know that the clothing we buy instead is more ethically produced? And even if we succeed in solving the problem of unethically produced clothing, then what about the coffee we buy, or the fuel that heats our homes that arrived through a pipeline crisscrossing native lands? Even as we work toward decolonized preaching, we can expect a certain circular movement rather than a straightforward, linear progress. We are so entrenched, so enmeshed in the systems of empire that it will take much more than our words to produce freedom. And thus it is the gospel that saves us—reminding us that freedom is not achieved by human actions alone, but by the Triune God working within and among us, and often in spite of us.

Given the centrality of scripture for preaching, it is important to address the manner in which decolonizing preaching will be especially difficult regarding non-traditional interpretations of scripture. A postcolonial hermeneutic approach may yield an interpretation that is unfamiliar, unpalatable to listeners. As Peter Gomes writes,

Good news to some will almost inevitably be bad news to others. In order that the gospel in the New Testament might be made as palatable as possible to as many people as possible, its rough edges have been shorn off and the radical edge of Jesus’ preaching has been replaced by a respectable middle, of which “niceness” is now God. When Jesus came preaching, it was to proclaim the ends of things as they are and the breaking in of things that are to be: the status quo is not to be criticized; it is to be destroyed.<sup>12</sup>

To some extent, postcolonial biblical hermeneutics is aimed at restoring the radical edge of the gospel. Those of us who depend upon the status quo are those who stand to lose ourselves—the anchor of our privilege taken up, setting us adrift. This is a difficult gospel, which undoes us and decentres us. Think of the rich young ruler who receives such troubling instructions from Jesus (Mark 10:17-27, Matt 19:16-26, Luke 18:18-23). While seeking to be faithful, he is dismayed when he learns that he will lose everything in order to gain what he desires. This is the good news of postcolonial preaching, even for those who stand to lose. In losing ourselves, we are

---

<sup>12</sup> Peter Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2007), 31.



found. In this process, we are utterly dependent on God's grace, a dependence which itself is liberating.

Johnny Bernard Hill writes of his own prophetic rage as a source and inspiration toward postcolonial theology. Most white preachers will not experience that kind of rage or impetus for change. Even those who yearn with a prophetic zeal for justice on behalf of others will likely lack such personal experience. Without a profound personal experience of injustice and domination, many listeners may respond with ambivalence or apathy. This is particularly difficult in an age where many preachers ask "what's in it for my people?" and listeners ask "what's in it for me?" A postcolonial, theological approach to preaching argues that the gospel is for others, not only for us. The suffering and needs of others, the freedom and well-being of one's neighbor takes precedence over my own needs. Thus, from a postcolonial perspective, the good news is for me, but not only for me. Postcolonial preaching invokes a more generous, wide-reaching conception of gospel. Part of decolonizing preaching then, is to teach our congregations to look differently at good news. This is a gospel of self-limitation which makes space for others. We take our cue from Christ's kenotic self-giving love.

If a postcolonial gospel is to be good news for all people, it cannot be a solely deconstructive process. Ronald Allen reminds us that deconstruction must be accompanied by construction: "People need a place to stand that offers a positive vision of life."<sup>13</sup> A postcolonial homiletic calls into question so much of what is normative—the past, the present, our own identity. Preachers and listeners might become so decentred and disoriented that they feel they can say nothing at all, or have no idea what to think about anything. Thus, postcolonial preaching must not remain at a deconstructive level, but begin to construct a viable alternative vision of reality. As noted above, I have located this alternative vision in God's own nature that challenges the prevailing and familiar narrative of empire. Others will find an alternative vision elsewhere within theological discourse.

White North American preachers are only at the beginning of a conversation about the impact of postcolonial perspectives on preaching. I suspect this conversation has already been happening for many years among other groups of preaching within the North American academy—African American, Hispanic, Asian American etc., and certainly it has shaped the actual sermons of many in communities. Whether or not postcolonial perspectives will benefit mainline homiletics is dependent on the conversation partners. For affluent congregations of European heritage, this approach is intended to yield a gradual reorientation. It is not advisable to announce "I'm preaching a postcolonial sermon today," and proceed to lay bare the centuries of wrongdoing and complicity. Rather, postcolonial preaching is a process of awareness, renaming, and identity formation. Themes of empire and liberation are rampant in scripture—the central story of our faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is itself a story of God's victory over the power of empire that seek to kill and separate. The good news, the gospel claim of this approach is that we are being continually recreated to participate in an alternative discourse that has already been established by the Triune God.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching and the Other* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2009), 70.