

# Imagine

Another World Is Possible

## A Bible Study and Reflection Guide

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OF CHRIST**



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*This resource was produced in partnership with  
the UCC Council for American Indian Ministries*



## NOTES

- 1 Sugirtharajah, S. G., *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 1-2.
- 2 Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. This is adapted from her introduction.
- 3 Sugirtharajah, p.21.
- 4 I am grateful to a former colleague in the Hawaii Conference, Dr. Randall Furushima, for guidance in these questions.
- 5 Sugirtharajah, op cit, p. 88. These methods emerge from and have significant epistemological implications.
- 6 In Indian Country it is still possible to hear the challenge, "You can't be Christian and Indian at the same time. You must choose!"
- 7 Brueggemann, Walter, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes*, Westminster John Knox, 2002, p. 168.
- 8 Herzog II, William R., *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*; Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.
- 9 F.E. Peters, *Jerusalem*, Princeton University Press, 1984, pages 36-37
- 10 Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994, p. 70.

## What is Neighbors In Need?

**N**eighbors In Need is the church's financial commitment to justice and compassion throughout the U.S. Neighbors in Need is distributed to a wide array of congregations and nonprofits working for justice and helping their neighbors in their communities and



across the country. One-third of the offering supports the Council for American Indian Ministry (CAIM), including the 20 American Indian congregations in the UCC.

Two-thirds of the offering supports justice advocacy, just peace and peace with justice programs, and community grants.

Many congregations receive Neighbors in Need on the first Sunday of October, World Communion Sunday. However, you can donate on-line to NIN during any time of the year by logging on to [www.ucc.org/nin](http://www.ucc.org/nin).

*The following two Bible studies are offered to congregations to help with deepening thought and understanding about justice in our society and its roots in the Bible.*

# Exploring Postcolonial Racism: A Native American Prospective

by Rev. Norman W. Jackson

**H**ow could the liberating, radically inclusive, egalitarian, justice-oriented, life giving gospel become such an instrument of culturism, colonialism, racism, sexism, heterosexism and exclusivism? It is colonialism's impact on Christendom.

The old cliché that “what you see depends upon from where you look,” is as true of Bible study as it is anything else. The mainline churches are accustomed to looking at Scripture through Western eyes which has led to habit patterns of interpretation. For instance, how many times have you heard the parable of the talents used either as a rationale for stewardship or for capitalism? How many times have you heard the story of

***Many peoples who have been colonized, who have through the years internalized what the colonizers said about them, are now in the process of “decolonizing their soul.”***

the widow's mite as a way to encourage you to be more generous to the church? Or, the Great Commission of Matthew to launch a membership recruitment program?

It is now well known that the Western church interpreted much of Scripture to legitimate the

missionary expansion from the 1500s to the end of World War II. The narrative of the conquest of the promised land was easily translated into the doctrine of Manifest Destiny which led to the decimation of the indigenous population of the Americas. If the natives of this continent could be pictured as Canaanites then the Americas could be seen as the promised land, and it became a Christian duty to drive out the native peoples without troubled conscience. To this day, the genocide of Native Americans lives in a pre-dawn setting of awareness, and evokes little bad conscience in the dominant culture.

Postcolonial theory and criticism has become well known in various of the humanities – so much so that it is in danger of becoming mainstream. But, S. G. Sugirtharajah<sup>1</sup> says, “Biblical studies has been a reluctant entrant into the arena.” This will be a minor attempt

The “Good” Samaritan story in Luke 10 as told to us even in our childhood implies that the majority of Samaritans are not good, but here is one “good” one, one who is of unusual spirituality, one who truly understands God's mercy and justice. His actions attest to a higher righteousness that Jesus tells his disciples to emulate.<sup>10</sup> Isn't it ironic that we are taught to be “good,” to be extra generous, like this particular person, to care for the needy and oppressed (those we don't like or with whom we don't associate). So, we give benevolently, often with judgment, to the despised groups, but we don't find things in their lives or cultures that make for role models and generous gifts to us. Jesus gives us an example of a person (among many) from the despised group of Samaritans whose character and values are laudable and worth embracing. It is Good Sam's morals and ethics that are the heart of being a good neighbor, a good relative. From the morals and ethics flow generosity that creates justice.

***It is Good Sam's morals and ethics that are the heart of being a good neighbor, a good relative. From the morals and ethics flow generosity that creates justice.***

In the UCC season for the Neighbors in Need Offering, the Parable of the Good Samaritan is a two-edged sword that on the one hand conveys a message to be generous to the point of giving a day's wages for the care of others. Yet it is equally important to re-examine the Good Samaritan story and to discover a newly-defined concept of neighbor that emerges from the perspective that The Other, the one previously excluded, also has the means with which to bless, to show mercy, to extend justice beyond the requirements of the Old Testament social legislation. Those of the Christian church can receive care, mercy, and justice from those who are looked down upon. Those whom Christians believe need charity more than justice can reciprocally be models of mercy and justice, which are gifts for all of us. It is time to look at a concept of reciprocal neighborliness and reciprocal justice – as well as a time to be generous.

Generosity and reciprocity with justice within the whole human family are set before us.

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the other side, I was thinking about people who pass me by. You know. They go across the street to avoid me. They are people who owe me money, usually my family members.” Napua and I nodded with understanding. Avoidance, we know it well.

In the first century C.E. the region known as Samaria, between Galilee and Judea, was inhabited especially by people whose worship of the God of Israel differed from that of their Jewish neighbors in several significant respects. In particular, they traced their descent to the ancient northern kingdom of Israel, read a different version of the Pentateuch, and denied the legitimacy and centrality of the temple in Jerusalem. Instead, they venerated the site of a temple on Mount Gerizim, which had been destroyed in 128 B.C.E. (Read Ezra and Nehemiah.)<sup>9</sup> The regular and ongoing tense relations between Jews and Samaritans may be evidenced in Matthew 10:5-6 where Jesus is quoted early in his ministry. Yet the Samaritan religion survives to the present in several communities in modern-day Israel.

**Hawaiian word for prisoners is pa'ahao. Hawaiian words for Native Hawaiian are kanaka maoli.**

**The name of their group of traditional religious practitioners is Native Hawaiian Spirituality and Culture Group.**

**The name of our advocacy and support group is Advocates and Supporters for the Free Exercise of Religion for Native Hawaiians at Diamondback.**



to suggest how American Indian people can use postcolonial perspectives to gain a new understanding of our Christian faith.

Postcolonialism is notoriously difficult to define (or better, to describe), because the meaning of the term “postcolonial” lacks a consensus, and continues to be debated. What follows is a very free adaption of Kwok Pui-lan’s description.<sup>2</sup> The prefix “Post” suggests to some that we have entered a post colonial era. Others suggest rather that it has been replaced by neocolonialism. But, postcolonialism denotes not just a time of history. It includes a reading strategy that aims to expose the frameworks, assumptions, theory of knowledge, etc., of a EuroAmerican culture. It points to the colonizer’s stereotypical images of the colonized. Some have argued postcolonial refers to “having gone through,” “after,” and “a notion of time, which, though not linear, is marked by events that may technically be finished, but can only be understood by reviewing the devastation those events have left in the lives of people.” To Kwok Pui-lan “postcolonial” also refers to the intention to disengage from the whole colonial mental apparatus.



Many peoples who have been colonized, who have through the years internalized what the colonizers said about them, are now in the process of “decolonizing their soul.” This means recovering the richness of their own traditions, working to rid themselves of the racist thought patterns the colonizer forced on them, and to grasp how contemporary culture, informed by colonial patterns, continues to victimize the colonized.

Sugirtharajah says that “What postcolonialism studies did was to introduce power and politics into the world of literary criticism in such a way as to expose how some literature, art, and drama were implicitly linked to European colonialism.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, postcolonial Bible study sets out to show how thoroughly the assumptions of the colonial West are embedded in much biblical interpretation.

To begin with, it is important to understand there are a number of questions that guide postcolonial biblical study, questions which some current biblical studies also ask. For

instance, we will ask,<sup>4</sup> “Who has the power to interpret or tell stories? To whom do the stories/texts belong?” And, most importantly, “Who controls the meaning?” Regarding the lectionary we are asked, “Who decides what texts we choose?” Some of us recall a decade or so ago the lectionary was challenged because of the seemingly small number of justice-oriented texts. What does the current selection of lectionary texts tell us we should be about?

Against, or for, whom are the stories (or interpretations) aimed? The Bible is full of texts that speak on behalf of those who receive injustice from the powerful, but it also has numerous texts which legitimate the rich and powerful. How do we deal with the latter? The introductory quotation to this paper describes what colonialism has done to an egalitarian and justice oriented faith. We need to be very clear when we hear interpretations of these texts which legitimate the powerful, because it is the interpretations which have accumulated authority through the ages.

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Another question: “Who has the power to access information/knowledge?” Sugirtharajah suggests one way it has happened in the past. “*For example, look at the opening lines of George Strecker’s ‘The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary.’*

*‘No proper exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount can ignore the results of more than two hundred years of historical research into the New Testament.’ Such a claim rules out, at the outset, the right of a reader or an interpreter to use any other means to understand the text, and those who do not practice the methods nor engage with them are seen as outside the circle and as outcasts.”<sup>5</sup> Strecker refers here, of course, to Euro-American western methodologies, primarily historical criticism. This perspective excluded non-Europeans and Euro-Americans from doing serious exegesis – and more. The rest of us were excluded from legitimate study. So both the assumptions and the resulting content constructed by western methodologies became “normative,” making the rest of us perspectival. These methodological assumptions and their content, made hegemonic by imperialism, limited the capacity to see outside of them in order to critique imperialism, and prevented “new Christians” from contextualizing their own faith.<sup>6</sup>*

Several additional questions are worth noting. “Who has a voice? Who says this way of interpreting is the normative rule? What reality does this discipline/government/system try to crush? What reality is it trying to erase? What reality is it trying to suppress?”

America, Inc. Among the Hawaiian prisoners are native Hawaiians similar in circumstance and worldview to many American Indian Nations. Tomorrow morning, Mr. Kini Burke of Hilo, HI, would lead us as we join 100 or so native Hawaiian men in a sunrise service on the prison athletic field in fulfillment and tribute to ancient religious ceremonies held during the Makahiki season, a time for a taste of home and grounding in traditional spirituality. In this past year of struggle for religious freedom, the prisoners, the Oklahoma supporters and I have become more than neighbors for the free exercise of religion. We have become relatives. The hospitality, thoughtfulness, and the prayers the men offer us are gifts we need and cherish.

When my mind wandered back into the worship service, the two teenaged usher-brothers were walking to the front of the church to put two chairs before the congregation as Pastor Rudy concluded his sermon with an altar call.



***Diamondback Correctional Facility is owned by Corrections Corporation of America and is located at Watonga,***

“Perhaps you are like the man in the story. Even as a Christian, you feel robbed and beaten, and you are here today in need of a kind, compassionate neighbor. Maybe you need someone to pay the price for your care until you are on your feet. Today may be the day you need to meet Jesus, the ultimate neighbor. Come and meet Jesus.”

“Who would have thought we Christians needed help from our neighbors? Didn’t we think the broken and the beaten needed us as their neighbors?” Napua McShane, a student at Eden Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO., surmised. “Pastor Rudy switched the sermon around on us. We’re not always called to be the good Christian Samaritan. We’re the persons in need, the robbed and oppressed peoples.”

Kini said with a hearty laugh, “When Pastor was talking about the Levite passing by on

# Good Sam

by Rev. Rosemary McCombs Maxey

Acting Director of the Eagle Butte Learning Center,  
a ministry of the Council for American Indian Ministry



*Then turning to his disciples, Jesus said to them privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”*

*Luke 10: 23-24, NRSV*

## Focal Passage:

Luke 10:25-37

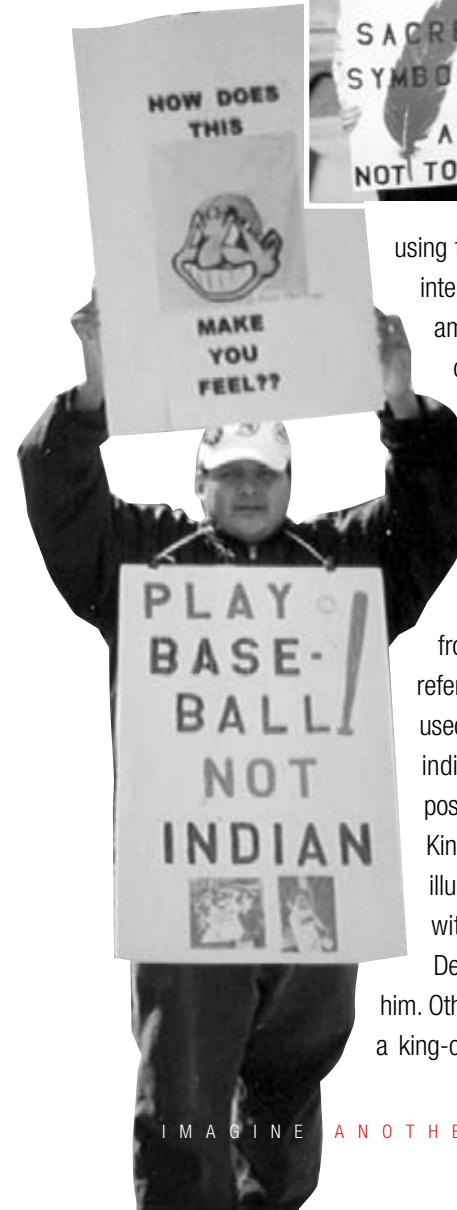
**“Wow! What a powerful sermon that was,” Napua enthusiastically remarked. “I just loved it!” Kini, from the backseat of the car, replied, “Really good. We had plenty good time to think about what the minister said.”**

As I drove my two native Hawaiian guests down the dusty, dirt road from the Weogufkee Indian Baptist Church, Hanna, Oklahoma, toward my home, I wondered if I had gone to the same service as they. I remembered Pastor Rudy beginning his sermon. He had led a song and offered a prayer in our Mvskoke language. He, in English, began his soft-spoken, deliberative, sometimes casual style of preaching by telling us to turn to Luke 10 in our Bibles for the story of the Good Samaritan. I remember doing that while thinking, “Oh yes. The Good Sam story that teaches us to feel guilty about not helping our neighbors enough. We never seem to do enough.”

My thoughts moved on to the logistics of tomorrow, when Napua, Kini, and I would join other supporters from the UCC in visiting Native Hawaiian men incarcerated in a private prison in Watonga, Oklahoma. To alleviate overcrowding of prisoners in Hawaii, the state had contracted for 800 men to be plunked down in the middle of Cheyenne-Arapaho Indian territory in a prison owned and operated by the Corrections Corporation of

Postcolonial Bible study, like all other Bible study, comes to the text with a set of assumptions, mind and spirit informed by a culture, a perspective constructed by both personal and community experiences, and an expectation of what one will find when delving into the text. Kwok Pui-lan says, “Even progressive theologians in the United States – feminist, liberationist, racial minorities among them – who have championed the

**“Who has a voice?”**



use of critical categories such as gender and class, and raised them in their works, have not sufficiently addressed theology’s collusion with colonialism in their theoretical frameworks.” To read the Bible from a postcolonial perspective one constantly has to have in mind the experience of being colonized, how the colonizer legitimated his/her activity using the Bible, and how they used power to force their interpretations on the colonized. Many Christians among the colonized continue to struggle with 19th century biblical understandings.

This brief study will close with a few examples of how postcolonial Bible study can change understanding of several familiar texts.

What follows are suggestions of how some well-known texts might be looked at differently from a postcolonial perspective. We have already referred to the conquest which in a variety of ways was used to justify the invasion and the decimation of the indigenous peoples in the Americas. Another possibility would be the Reform of Josiah found in 2 Kings 22 - 23. This text has often been used as an illustration of how King Josiah launched a reform within his kingdom after having the book of Deuteronomy, which had been “discovered,” read to him. Others have proposed that Josiah’s reform was really a king-centered effort “at centralization that confiscated

the goods and produce of the agrarian society all around the city.”<sup>7</sup> This meant that all important actions, and particularly the financial resources, must be controlled by the Crown. Decentralized worship became forbidden. Brueggemann suggests this might be a “pious fraud,” which is closer to a power and financial grab by the king than it was a genuine religious reform. Referring to the above questions, we then might ask to whom does this text belong, and who controls the meaning?



***“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the Emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”***

would have been unthinkable. Some scholars have suggested this is also true of first century Palestine (Lev. 25:23). This suggests that Jesus put the Pharisees in a dilemma because they could not deny that everything in creation was God’s while at the same time suggesting they owe anything to the empire, subordinate to God’s creation. So rather than a compartmentalization which separates politics and religion, the subtext clearly subordinates Caesar to God. The dominant culture has not comprehended this.

The Widow’s Mite (Mk 12:41-44; Lk 21:1-4) has long been used as a means to encourage poor folk to give to the church. We believe that the Bible sometimes reveals to us realities we cannot escape. Reading this story from both gospels will clarify that Jesus does not praise this poor woman, but reveals to his listeners that here is just another case where the temple – priest establishment gouged the poor while not hurting the rich and powerful at all. Sound familiar?

The question about whether to pay taxes (Mat 22:15-22; Mk 12:13-17; Lk 20:20-26) has been used through the centuries to compartmentalize religion and church. Jesus was asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Turning it right back on the Pharisees, he responded, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the Emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” In Indian country where we know that everything is God’s, to suggest that anything belonged to the emperor

In English the commission to go and win disciples (Matthew 28:18 - 20) is filled with dominating and control verbs. It was not used for evangelism in the early church, the Middle Ages, or even Reformation time. It became the mantra for the missionary expansion which partnered with colonialism and imperialism, and provided a legitimate base to go and win disciples (which probably could mean students of God). More importantly, its use conflated gospel and culture, promoted manifest destiny, and other forms of coercive and violent imperialism. We should be reminded that what is often called the miraculous growth of the early church was a result primarily of the character of the churches, not an organized program of membership recruitment.

There are, of course, many other texts that could illustrate a postcolonial approach. Much work has been done on the book of Ruth in the Old Testament in which ***In Indian country where we know that everything is God’s, to suggest that anything belonged to the emperor would have been unthinkable.***

indigenous peoples do not identify with Ruth as she goes loyally with her mother-in-law rather than back to her own people. The parable of the talents was immediately recognized by peasants in Central America as the story of a cruel and powerful patron who gouged money from his clients, and severely punished the client who failed to forward enough graft to satisfy the patron. William Herzog<sup>8</sup> suggests that in reading many of the parables it would be helpful to learn not to identify the senior male as a metaphorical God figure. To dispense with that metaphor will open many new possibilities for finding the life of the colonized reflected even in the teachings of Jesus.

What we see depends upon from where we look. Postcolonial Bible study, for those of us who come from the devastations of having been colonized, shows how scripture can provide new vistas, revelations of reality, and a glimpse of the Holy justice which underlies the nature of our Creator.

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