

Jim Keat ([00:00](#)):

The Reverend Dr. Claudio Carvalhaes is a theologian liturgy and artist, a native Brazilian, and is currently serving as the associate professor of worship at Union Theological Seminary. Recently, he has been working on a global project called re-imagining worship as acts of defiance and alternatives. In the context of empire in this video, you'll hear a conversation between me, Jim Keat, the Director of Online Innovation at Convergence and Claudio. Carvalhaes. Your work in your role specifically at teaching at Union has a lot with worship and liturgy and preaching. So just maybe give us your, your, you know, backpocket stump speech, what's the role of preaching and worship in the church. And maybe particularly now in the season we've been in for this past year of the pandemic and what's to come, what's the role of preaching and worship liturgy in the church?

Claudio Carvalhaes ([00:54](#)):

I think in terms of preaching, I always say this, it takes, it takes a village to preach, right? Yeah. It's, it's, it's never an individual task, right. It is always a community event. And when we are a village, then the preacher has to think in terms of of, of what this village is about, right. And who's around it and who leads around it. And that has to do with, with, with people, but it has to do with, with the place in which we are the community of those we do not pay attention, meaning the poor, the the ones who never have anything, but also the trees, the, the the, the soil, the the worms, the the mice the the birds. And so that entails a whole collectivity for you to preach even like if we talk about the word pandemic, where we are now, right there, panddemos in etymologically means all the people.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([02:13](#)):

And I want to say that all the people, including more than humans who are other kinds of people, right? And, and so it is, it entails a lot of listening and, and, and paying attention. That's why the listening to the birds and the listening to the, the wind, the listening of our hearts, the listening of the people around us and, and, and, and, and, and, and the pains and the desires. And so I think the the preaching and the worship is this place for us to shift ourselves, to turn, to engage our doubts, our anxieties, our troubles, and our possibilities. Right? so the, the, the, the, the preacher has always known as, as famously by the herald, the storyteller and the interpreter, right? The the herald of, of, of whose news, right. Of the gospel, from where, and to whom the storyteller more than the storyteller of a biblical passage is the storyteller of a, of a people, the storyteller of of of a much larger cosmology and the interpreter of a world that is drenched in capitalism, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, death.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([03:47](#)):

So I think the preaching and the worship has this, this, this village where you have many worlds in it, right? You have the world of the Bible, you have the world of the community, you have the world of, of the globe, and you have the world of the earth. So all of this together is what church is about in terms of the the preacher for this times. I think it has both to help us, help us find ways to calm ourselves, help us to tell us what it is. This whole thing is about calming ourselves. And the anxiety comes and we commerce that was an anxiety pessimism and helping with panic attacks and, and, and, and with depression and isolation and, and death and mourning. But it is besides that. And with that, it is also thing that the preacher is, is the prophet who announces the end of the world because the way we are doing, if we pay attention to climate change, we are moving towards the, a, at the end of the world, as we know. So in that way, that's the role of the preacher or, or like, I remember this liturgic theologian from Sri Lanka, Tissa Balasuriya he used to say, no, I don't understand places where people go hungry

where there's, there's the Eucharist being celebrated nearby. And so that's the, the word of the prophet to say, what, what, what do you do with right.

Jim Keat (05:31):

Help students at union? And just anyone you work with balance that pastoral and prophetic nature of preaching, because it seems like the two are intermixed, but yet they're at the same time distinguishable. You can kind of feel the tone and the language of one for the other. How do you, how do you encourage students to make sure they're balancing the two or pastors today holding the two. What's, what's kind of, uh, an approach you take to that

Claudio Carvalhaes (05:58):

It's hard to, because they are going to a, to a church that is, that is just a mirror to the economic system. They are going to a place of inequality already being placed in an unequal system. There's very little they can do you know, it is just like, we, I, what I tell them is to, to go and fight at least for equal salaries, because then they can have a chance. Right. because Jim, if you didn't get a job at a church, the problem is not the structure. The problem is Jim. You had a problem. You didn't study in the right place. You didn't have the connections. You're not a theologian. You don't, you don't dress up. I don't know. There's something wrong about you. Right. And if I didn't get a job, it's my problem of my scholarship or what I do or don't, and this is what they said. We are so set up for the system that we, that we excuse the system of the church.

Claudio Carvalhaes (07:15):

Not normalize this or let it be normal. So what I tell them is that go and fight for equal salaries, every church, because the same way that we have to reach people, few individuals, and we have a middle class shrinking, and the vast majority of poor people growing is the same thing with the churches. We have 1% of wealthy, big steeple churches, a shrinking number of middle-class churches and a vast majority of churches with less than one hundred or 60 members. Yeah. So what do you do about, so it's, you are in the lucky pool, right? You go out, you finish seminary and are you lucky to go to a big church? Good for you if you, if you were in the middle class. Yeah. But if you go into a poor church that cannot pay you benefits, then you'd have to pile what three, four churches at once?

Claudio Carvalhaes (08:23):

I always tell this story of a student of mine who who came into me after graduating and we were having coffee. And she said, Claudio was offered a place at a church for 19 hours and a half. I said, why, why 19 hours and a half? And she said, if they offered me 20 hours, they would have to pay me benefits. And so what kind of churches is this? And not this local church, what kind of a structural checks do we live in? Where are we allowed this to happen? Yes. So we have to say, the people on the higher top day are wrong. They are living like the CEOs of banks. Why do we accept that? Or I can say the same thing with seminaries, why presidents and some people vice-president, and some scholars are getting this top salaries. Why we have a tier of, of, of disappearing tenure track positions.

Claudio Carvalhaes (09:26):

And then we'd have a whole bunch of adjuncts. And I read not long ago, a, a person saying I was teaching eight courses, a semester selling my blood in order to survive. Literally bleeding to stay alive. Yes. I mean, if you're not Christian, there is no rule. The rule is destruction is capitalism, but why we are Christians? Why we allow that? But we are afraid wherever I need to speak up. And I think there's

something that everybody wants to get to the steeple churches perhaps to get the better package. So I, I, I keep telling pastors and my students say, you know, after you leave the seminary, you know how you're going to be your call. You know how the Holy Spirit is going to work through you. It's like, there's, you're going to hear a call from there. And you're going to hear a call from there and let's see how the Spirit is gonna move you.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([10:25](#)):

This place is offering \$80,000 plus benefits. And this place is offering you \$15,000. Where's the Spirit? Let me feel? Exactly. Even our vocation is caught by the system. I'm not going there because that's where God is calling me, or I'm going to a rural church or a, or a struggling church because God is calling me. No, because I have to feed my kids. So it is a system that perpetuates itself. So how do I tell my students, you're going into a very unjust place to live and I cannot, how can I bless you? God is good all the time. Depending where you going. I would say, good luck and be happy. Don't forget that if you do not get a call, it's not because of you. Yeah. It's the system that is making you the guilty one while the church stands in its own unjust ways with all the rationalization that we need to keep this unjust system going.

Jim Keat ([11:54](#)):

What do we do to dismantle that? Like, I know that's not a, we can do it in two days, kind of a project. That's a, generation's kind of a project, but how you're talking about a way of thinking and being as a minister and a human that dismantles these unjust systems of capitalism in our society, and particularly in our church, how do we engage with that? Like tomorrow? Cause it's easy to say, Oh, that's such a big thing. I can't do anything. So I'm just going to accept it as it is. And that's often where we end up. I'll just wait for, you know, capitalism to implode on its own. But is that ever going to happen? It seems like it is a self-perpetuating system fueled by injustice. How do pastors, people of faith engage this unjust system today and tomorrow knowing we might not dismantle it entirely, but what can we even do now?

Claudio Carvalhaes ([12:45](#)):

Oh, that's, that's so fundamental. Right? And I think a few things. One is that we do not have generations for this to happen. Right? We are dying. The world is dying. We are not going to have, we are talking about just few years, right? If we look at the climate change now, Jim, what kind of world do your, your precious kid is, is going to happen. If in, in, in, in 30 years, all the ice caps are going to melt and there's not going to be able to cool down to the earth anymore. So what are you going to do? So that's what about the end of the world that we're talking about, right?

Jim Keat ([13:22](#)):

We're not going to be able to afford to join Elon Musk on a spaceship to Mars.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([13:26](#)):

There you go, because we have already, and this is the power of colonization and capitalism because we, we have this entitlement, this human exceptionalism and entitlement that we can colonize, not only the earth, but it can colonize the moon that it can colonize Mars. And that's what we are, we are trying to do because those rich people, they know that this earth is not going to hold us back if you continue this way and they are not scaling back. So that's why they are looking outside to find a life outside. But anyway, that's another conversation for us to do, but we don't have time, but I think there's something about capitalism. It is a totalizing system, but it can be destroyed. It can be undone. And we undo by, by,

and we'll have to, if we are to survive, right? If we are to find ways we have to change and there's more changes, as you said, have habits will happen.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([14:25](#)):

And this is completely doable. We can do this in the one national meeting of any church. I mean, what you do like in the Presbyterian church, for instance, that our church that we belong, you get a bunch of pastors to bring this, this, this project to the Presbytery, which is a local gathering of churches. This Presbytery approves, and send it to this Synod, this Synod, approves it to the General Assembly. And they decide that it's simple in some ways, it's that we can change it in a heartbeat, right? You just have to do it. We just have to do it. So create a project, talk to other people. But of course you have a lot of rationalizations, cause I've been talking about for many years and nothing happens. All I get is two things, either a silence or rationalizations. Oh, but you know, people live in different places.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([15:21](#)):

Yeah. You, you, you adjusted according to where you live, right. If you are in New York city, your, your salary would be higher because you it's, the expenses are bigger, but even if you were in the room, but, but you always have covered for you for your family, for your kids. And you'll have health insurance, you have enough for you to wake up in the morning and don't have to worry about your bills, but you can go and take care of people and you're right. So we can do that. It is just a matter of what, what is it that, and I was, tell me something from the gospel that will be against that. Once we have it, the same salary, then we can see that struggling churches. It is not about the budget. That's what we need to change, Jim. We have a church is based on, on budget.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([16:10](#)):

The church exists because a budget exists, if you don't have budget, you close the church. So I was a pastor for five years in Brazil in this community, when they call me, this was a very poor church. And so after two weeks, months, I guess, or three months the, the, the, the treasurer came to me and said, pastor, we don't have more money to pay you. So what do you mean? We don't have money. And, and then I said, what is it? He said I was going to stay with us. Yeah. Yes. And then what happened was every Sunday, it was very far away. And I had to take like two buses and a train to go to go, come back. And so every Sunday night I would spend the whole Sunday there every Sunday night when I leave with, after the, because the main worship is in the evening.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([17:07](#)):

So they would give me like bags of food. And this precious man would put \$5, would pay my way in and out. Wow. And I did this for five years. Wow. And you know why the church exists? We didn't have budget. We could barely pay for the lights. So we got into this plan to buy a piece of land to, to actually have, because it was rented. Was there anything, no, it was a an elder that gave us for free. It was his garage. And, and, and so we, we got into this, this plan to to raise money for a full year. We did all kinds of of events to raise money. And after the end we needed, I think \$8,000. We'll do the whole thing. Like buy the land and put together a box. After one year, we raised \$300 one year, and we did almost every weekend, you know yard sale or pizza sale Oh, ice cream sale everything, you name it. The kids went to wash people's cars, everything \$300. As soon as we had that, there's men came to us and said, pastor, my roof fell. And I said, Oh my goodness. He lived in a shack and this terrible place. And so how, how, how much? So we went to see and to put it together barely would cost \$300. Wow. That's where the money went and everybody was happy.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([18:51](#)):

We existed because of people needed each other. But that's the problem, Jim is because there's only happens when people need each other. But the problem here is that we are not, we don't need each other. Right. When we get there, we are individuals creating a community of self-sustain individuals. So if we are in the same church and tomorrow, you cannot pay the rent of your beautiful house, what can I do?

Jim Keat ([19:23](#)):

But isn't it, isn't that the liberal project, individual autonomy, self-sustaining individualism?

Claudio Carvalhaes ([19:30](#)):

If we are to change it, how would you break this liberalism? That is that the ground of this, of this country. It is that the ground of capitalism, we have to create to explode that liberal sense of freedom, individual freedom, and so on and so forth. Because then if something happens, if you do you baptize your child?

Jim Keat ([19:54](#)):

We have not yet. We are having those conversations to figure out what that means for us and for him.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([19:59](#)):

But you, you, you might do that. We're planning on it. Yeah. If you baptize your, your, your child and I am responsible for him, yes. Your child should never go hungry in his life. Yes. The borders of my country in Brazil should be completely open for him to go or to come back to our country because now he belongs to this community that I'll have to take care of his food, his housing, his school, his health, everything. That's what we're supposed to do.

Jim Keat ([20:38](#)):

And that's such a far, far cry from the world we're living in today.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([20:43](#)):

That's right. But there are ways, right. There are ways that we can breaking it. Salaries is the first way. First thing,

Jim Keat ([20:52](#)):

That's a, that's a, that's an easy, well, not easy, but it's, it's a good first way to, yeah, but it's just a matter of political wheel. Yes, yes. Right.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([21:02](#)):

For people who are at the top, pastors CEO of the nominations, they have to say, okay, my salary will go 10 times down now because I love my, my, my friends. Not because I own this place. It's because I love my people. Yeah. It's a change of the heart.

Jim Keat ([21:27](#)):

It's very easy in the big steeple churches, or just anywhere in America in particular to probably confuse need and want. Do I need this big salary? Well, no, but I want it. And therefore I convinced myself that I need it, or I create a system which needs it to sustain the system that I've built around me. Well, I need to pay my rent or my mortgage. Well, no, you don't need to. You just built a system that you're stuck in now. We create our own little micro capitalistic systems that mirror the big and everything is just a, an echo of itself. And nothing gets fixed until we all take your class and maybe start changing something.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([22:06](#)):

Real. And that's exactly, it is an ecosystem that we create, but it's an ecosystem of death. Yeah. Yes. Of, of, I am against you. If there's one church right there, Jim, and you and me are in, in the process, there's no way that it can say Jim, shall we go together and share it? Yeah. Because then I'll have a little, and you have a little, no, I have to put you down and I have to get it. And they say, sorry, Jim, I, I, I'm sorry. I, I, I got it. You didn't.

Jim Keat ([22:37](#)):

Claudio thinking of everything we're talking about here I think this definitely encapsulates courage and what it means to be a courageous church. As you look back on our collective ancestors, who would you say illustrates the kind of courage that we're talking about?

Claudio Carvalhaes ([22:57](#)):

When you look at our ancestors, we always have to look because we have bad ancestors and good ancestors, right. It's not when they become an ancestor that they are immediately like good thing. Yeah. If you, if you look at, at some religions that deal with energies of, of the of the dead people, you see that dead, there's, there's, there's bad energy and there's good energy there too. So you just need to be aware of that. But I, in some ways, every single human beings, my ancestor, right? In some ways, and I do have my, my close ones that they can relate by, by, by blood..

Claudio Carvalhaes ([23:44](#)):

But so complicated. Right. I have, my, my great-grandmother was indigenous shaman, but I cannot claim it because my mom doesn't remember what people she belonged because there was such an erasure. So it's, it's hard, but it will know what I love, but I will, I'll lean on her for my own life, no matter what, but there's something too about, we don't think about that. But the ancestry of, of the living beings. Ancestry of the tree, the ancestry, like the river near me. It's my ancestor. Yeah. And I go there and I bow to the river because he or she is my ancestor and I, and I, and they have, and this river have given water to, to the family of my, of my wife and my kids. So those are living waters. So they're living ancestors for me. Yeah. And I always, I always remember, you know have you read Robin Kimmerer? She has a book that is famous, Braiding Sweetgrass, but she has another one on moss. And that one, she said something, I don't remember exactly. She said something about, you know, that moss, that moss is living there 4,000 years.

Claudio Carvalhaes ([25:37](#)):

And they are fine. So there's some courage to exist through the thousands of years. Yeah. And that's the courage that I want. If they are fine, I'll be fine.