

## **“Jesus-Love Can Be Dangerous”**

Preached at The United Church of Los Alamos  
by Don Childers on May 20, 2007

The truth is that there are a lot of bibles sold and purchased in this land. There are a lot of people attending religious services. Yet, when a person or group truly begins to live out the biblical witness of love even in small ways, they often run into hostility. Even a little of real “Jesus-love” can be dangerous.

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While I was in Seattle, Washington serving as a youth minister an incident happened that has always stuck with me. Our church, First Christian Church, was at that time a strong congregation several blocks “up the hill” from downtown Seattle. On Capitol Hill, where our church was located, were located representations of all the major denominations.

As you traveled down the hill toward downtown Seattle you entered the business district. It was buzzing with commerce. Grand stores and restaurants were located along Fifth Avenue and Fourth Avenue. Yet, if you traveled just a few blocks more, down the hill toward Puget Sound the landscape changed dramatically. Second Avenue was the street of bars and prostitutes. First Avenue was the end of the road, Skid Row.

Many congregations, including ours, supported a ministry center that was located on First Avenue and ministered to the persons unfortunate enough to be there. The entire ministry to that area was done in and out of the “love of Christ”.

Then one Sunday a person from Skid Row actually responded to the invitations often made on First Avenue to “join us in church”. This Sunday one person walked the many long blocks UPHILL to reach our church. He came in and sat down. Persons moved away from him. He smelled and he was not dressed as we were dressed. Persons stared at him. Perhaps someone even said something. By communion he was gone.

The next Sunday, Dr. Allen Lee, Senior Minister, used this unknown stranger as an example. He said he sure hoped we were not visited by Christ last Sunday because if we had been visited we had failed. When we truly love as Christ has taught that love will often lead to inconvenience and even to danger.

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Paul had recently arrived in Greece. Arriving and traveling to Philippi he expected to find a local synagogue. Finding none he heard there was a prayer meeting of Jewish persons meeting at the river. Paul’s pattern was to go to the synagogue, participate in the synagogue and use the synagogue as a base for his message about Jesus. Paul after all was still a practicing Jew even though he was a follower of Jesus who was also Jewish. Paul expected to find some men meeting for prayer by the river and was surprised to find that there were only women.<sup>1</sup> As a Jewish male, Paul would have had no place for women in worship and

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 16: 11-15.

leadership. Yet, Jesus always was inclusive and Paul by this time was growing toward the conclusion that in Christ there was neither “Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, and male nor female.” Thus although it was a step across a pretty firm boundary, Paul’s first convert was a woman, a businesswoman at that, and a Gentile at that, named Lydia.

Then later Paul and Silas were on their way to a place of prayer when they discovered a slave girl was following them. She was possessed by a demon, what we would probably call “mentally ill” in our day. Apparently, the slave girl had a talent to predict people’s future and so her owners were making quite a good living exploiting her talent.

Apparently, from the story, this slave girl continued following Paul and Silas, shouting out at them and creating quite a disturbance. After several days of this Paul finally turns to her and heals her, “in the name of Christ”. Now you would think that this would be a welcomed and joyous occasion. This poor girl, possessed by a demon, was suffering intensely, and now she is healed. Well her owners did not think this was such a great thing. In a moment this “good news” had cost them their livelihood because of meddling preachers who had not learned to stay within the boundaries good society sets for them. So Paul and Silas are arrested and hauled before local judges. The charge against Paul and Silas is that they are “Jews” and they are “disturbing the city”. Apparently the crowd also joined in, attacking Paul and Silas and so the judges, the city magistrates, ordered that the two men be stripped and

publicly beaten. After the thrashing, Paul and Silas are thrown into jail, placed into the inner area of what had to be a dark, smelly, dungeon, and to make matters worse their feet were placed in stocks.

The story will go on about how they sang while in prison, their miraculous escape from prison, the conversion of the jailor and his family, and how everything finally ended on a positive note with a little party. But I want to stop with Paul and Silas, in jail, for healing a slave girl. We are reminded that a little bit of religion can get us in a lot of trouble.

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Many years ago I was serving a church in a state that was considering legalizing gambling and encouraging the building of casinos. The lure of casinos was that they would provide income and jobs to communities and to the state. Many of these communities had been and were the continuing victims of jobs being outsourced to Mexico and Asia.

So communities who had lost factories, such as St. Joseph, Missouri, and who were facing rising unemployment and social costs saw casinos and gambling as a magic pill to cure all the ills. There was wide support from business, chambers of commerce, and politicians from both parties and other notable community leaders.

In one of the few times in which the church was unified, a state-wide campaign ensued against the legalization of casinos, supported by the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, the Disciples of Christ churches, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodists, the Presbyterian Churches, the Southern Baptist churches, the Nazarene churches, the Assemblies of God churches, the Pentecostal Churches, ---you get the picture. One would think that the Kingdom of God had arrived to find one issue that all these diverse denominations could agree on---they were opposed to legalizing gambling and casinos. The reasons ran from scriptural reasons postulated by the conservative churches to sociological and psychological reasons postulated by the more liberal churches. In short church leaders said that legalized gambling was a poor way and a destructive way for a community and a state to raise money.

In this campaign by churches there was intense criticism of the church for “meddling” in politics---even though the meddling was more about economics not politics. The church was accused of being anti-capitalistic, anti-labor, anti-growth, and anti-business. Threats of removing the “non-profit” status of churches were made. But the church persisted even in the face of such threats in its efforts to oppose the legalization of gambling. The irony is that the proposition passed with the church’s opposition making virtually no impact on the vote.

Of course in the years since the vote many of the fears expressed by the churches have come to pass. In St. Joseph, Missouri the new casino drained money from the malls, restaurants, and businesses as people spent their dollars at the casino and not elsewhere. The casino fostered more business closures, more unemployment, and caused an increase in a host of other sociological and personal problems that the city and state now have to deal with. But this is all history. The interesting thing is that when the church had a fairly unified voice warning about something the church was severely criticized for meddling in things that they had no business meddling in. The fact that the measure passed quickly dissipated threats of bringing the church back into line so that it would no longer meddle in matters of commerce.

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Jesus-faith does impact our daily living, our values, and when lived out will bring us into conflict. Jesus faith will bring into question our continuing fascination with war and violence, our greed, and our value system that values success and wealth above all.

Jim Wallis pointed out in an article titled ***“Biblical Archaeology and Taxes”*** that archaeologists digging into the ruins of ancient Israel have discovered some interesting things. In some periods of time they find that the homes are all about the same size and the artifacts reveal that there was relative economic equality among most of the people. IN other words, there was only a small or no gap between the economic top

and bottom of society. In those times, archaeologists noted the biblical prophets are noticeably silent. There is no Isaiah, Amos, or Jeremiah speaking out.<sup>2</sup>

Wallis goes on to relate that when the diggings have discovered periods of time in which there were huge homes and little hovels and the objects reveal a great gap between rich and poor, this was the time in which the prophets took to the streets and lifted up the poor and decried the rich. Faith does have an impact on the things of life.

When Paul and Silas healed the woman they were meddling in several things. First they eliminated the economic base of her owners who were exploiting her. Second, they healed a “slave” woman perhaps putting her in a position to be free. Third, they healed a woman. One simple act of love got them beaten and thrown in jail.

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The good news is that Jesus does free us to love unconditionally even if such love might bring conflict. Jesus’ love frees us to step over cultural and even religious approved boundaries and love and accept all people---as Paul did and of course as Jesus did. Jesus’ love frees us to forgive when others expect vengeance, to be peacemakers when others cry for war, and to heal when others want us to leave well enough alone.

Back in 2001 there was an interview on “Good Morning America” of Jim Bowers.<sup>3</sup> On April 20, 2001 over the Amazon River an American

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<sup>2</sup> “Biblical Archaeology and Tax Cuts”, Jim Wallis, found at [www.beliefnet.com/story/79/story\\_730.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/79/story_730.html).

missionary plane was flying over the area. The missionary plane was detected by a CIA funded observation plane and suspected of being a drug running plane. A Peruvian jet intercepted the plane and shot it down discovering later that they had mistakenly shot down an American missionary flight. The pilot of the small plane, Kevin Donaldson managed to crash land the plane and he, Jim Bowers and Cory, their son survived. However, Jim's wife and small baby did not survive.

Such a tragedy can evoke anger as well as sadness. Yet, on the ABC interview Jim Bower's was asked if he blamed God for taking his wife and child. Of course the question itself was inappropriate since it was the Peruvian Air Force and a mix-up in language that downed the plane not God. Yet, Jim Bower's responded that he did not blame God and that in fact he was thankful for the 19 years he had with his wife and the 7 months he had shared with their baby. He then went on to say that he had no anger toward the pilot of the plane that shot them down. He said he had even sent a bible to the pilot of the jet. Jim Bower's said in a note he had sent along with the gift he had assure the pilot that he had forgiven him and was praying for him. The interviewer seemed surprised at the answer. Are we?

In Christ there is a freedom. We are free to no longer hold grudges. We are free to love and to forgive. We no longer have to be rooted in a materialistic world where value is determined by the size of our home,

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<sup>3</sup> ABC., "Good Morning America", Interview with Jim Bowers, May 24, 2001.

bank account, or the number of degrees we have earned. We can sing while imprisoned as Paul and Silas would in fact do. We can heal and free a slave as Paul and Silas did. We can love our jailor and lead the jailor to God, as Paul and Silas would do. We can, in short love. Amen.