

## Commerce and faith in Conflict

Rev. Jim Cullen – May 16, 20210

For two years now there have been constant news stories about the economy. From Goldman Sachs, to Fannie Mae, to the crumbling of the Greek economy, to the dramatic drop in the stock market a few days ago because of a mistake of entering a very wrong number into a computer – called the “fat finger” problem. Behind so many of these stories are stories of greed. There is a sense of entitlement that certain people get some astronomical bonuses. There are the rich and powerful, those who control other people and whose decisions impact the financial well being of many many ordinary people. All of this is happening at the same time as others are struggling to survive. The collective debt of Canadians is over \$1 trillion. This is not just about money. It is about power and control. The interests of commerce and the interest of religion and faith are in conflict.

We turn to the lesson from Acts. It is almost too blunt. It comes from the days of the early church when people like Paul and Silas were enthusiastic in spreading the message of Jesus. Paul and Silas are in Philippi. In the city life is intense and volatile. In the streets Paul and Silas are strangers. To make things more dangerous, they are also Jews, always in danger of becoming the focus of hostility.

A young woman, a fortune teller, owned by people we would probably call pimps, followed Paul and Silas. She has probably overheard them speaking in some nearby public place. Her wild shouts catch their attention. Paul comforts her and in some way gets the woman to settle down. He talks to her about her life and how Jesus changes people’s lives. What Paul has to say to her releases her from her slavery. Her fortune telling days are over. She is no longer of any use to her owners.

It is then that things become nasty. The lucrative enterprise has been ruined. The girl’s owners haul the visitors into court. As we listen to the charges, we can hear the moral posturing: ***These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.***

What follows is very grim indeed. The travelers are stripped naked and publicly flogged –the kind of thing that happens in Iraq and Afghanistan. Apart from shame, a public flogging is extremely painful, and can be fatal. As if this is not enough, the travelers are flung into ***the innermost cell***, and tied up. You can read for yourselves what happened next – their escape, but that is another story.

This morning I would like to look at times when there is conflict between belief and commerce. The people who had Paul and Silas thrown into jail did not care about their preaching, probably didn’t care about the fact they had a growing number of followers. They objected to what was happening to their wallets. The girl was a fortune teller. This girl was a money maker. She was part of their income. And now she was free from her past and free from them and they were mad.

Their anger comes from losing control over someone else. The message of the Gospel sets people free and that makes some people mad. Matters of faith and ethics are in conflict with selfishness, greed and control.

Today there are so many examples of people in power who place personal gain ahead of other people. There are stories of scandals where those who have the opportunity, in government and private companies, take more for themselves causing many others to lose savings, investments, and retirement income. Some people just do

not get it. They believe that nothing matters other than their personal gain. This is where the teachings of Jesus run head long into the values and actions of some in our society.

Individually and as a community of faith we do have something to say about those who have a lot and want more, leaving ordinary folk with even less.

Some years ago, I worked for 5 years for the TUCC (Toronto United Church Council). One of my projects was to take an old downtown church on Queen Street West, refurbish it in partnership with The City of Toronto, The Provincial and Federal Governments. It was to be a place where a variety of people could open small businesses or do some public services work in the community. The businesses, for the most part, would be operated by people who called themselves psychiatric survivors. Since it opened it has and continues to be a great opportunity for many individuals to find employment and a meaningful life. But getting there was not easy.

For some people I worked with on the project, I was the enemy. Even from the first time I sat down at the table with the stakeholders, the people who would operate the businesses, I was the enemy, someone not to trust. There were 2 gay men. There were several women who lived on the edge of coping with life. I was male and white. I represented an institution – the church. The church owned the land and building and I controlled the budget.

Part of my responsibility was to show that the church was a helping partner not another abusive power. It was very frustrating trying to develop something that would be to their benefit and yet make business sense. Many times I wondered if we could ever create a working partnership. I came to understand why they reacted the way they did. Their lives were a history of abuse, being taken advantage of by institutions, put down by those with power, money and position. But we made it happen. We learned to trust each other. They learned that the church was on their side.

Today there are several very successful groups operating out of 761 Queens Street West – a bicycle shop, several stores selling crafts, an office cleaning company called “Fresh Start”, the most successful psychiatric survivor business in Canada, a restaurant called “The Raging Spoon”, an organization that helps people find affordable housing and several other small businesses.

People are freed from their oppressors. People now have income and dignity. They are free. Just like the fortune teller that Paul and Silas set free to live her own life.

There are other times when the church exercises unnecessary power and control. I would like to see the church get out of the wedding business. We could follow the pattern of some other countries. Weddings should be a government service. First, there would be a legal ceremony. Then, a Christian or religious ceremony could be arranged for those for whom it is important. This would eliminate the need of some to jump through some “religious requirements” that are not part of their life. I think this would be an honest approach and would free people to do what is meaningful for them.

The message of the gospel is that we are called to set each other free. Often it means that we will be in conflict with those in power – people whose money, position or the institution they represent thrive at the expense of the vulnerable.