

## Keeping The Faith: Preaching The Good News

Mary A. Tolbert

Preached by Dr. Tolbert at *Breathing Life*, the Open & Affirming Training Event sponsored by the Gay, Lesbian and Affirming Disciples Alliance, February 10, 2006, First Christian Church, Las Vegas, Nevada



*Dr. Tolbert's writings on the gospel of Mark, including Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective (1989), have established her as a leading voice in the interpretation of the New Testament. Her research also focuses on feminist hermeneutics and social location. She is co-editor of Reading from this Place, Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States, Reading from this Place, Volume 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective (1995), and Teaching the Bible: the Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy (1998). Dr. Tolbert currently serves as the Executive Director of The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at the Pacific School of Religion.*

---

**T**hank you so much for inviting me to address you today in the warmth of Las Vegas! I want to frame my comments to you this afternoon by two scripture passages that have come to both inspire and guide me in recent years around LGBT concerns and the churches: Mark 5: 1-20, the story of the Gerasene demoniac, and 2 Timothy 4:7, the valedictory verse on Paul's life and contributions. Both of these Scriptures, as I will suggest to you, begin to focus our attention in this increasingly vicious debate over LGBT people in the churches, including the Disciples churches, on the continually important and vital shift we are making from being victims of this debate to being leaders in the fight for the soul of Christianity itself. Let's start with Mark 5:1-20.

Surely you remember the story of Jesus' boat trip to the other side of the Sea of Galilee where he was met by a man with an unclean spirit who had been living, if you could call it that, among the tombs because no one wanted him in the towns. He had been bound with chains, but even those chains could not stop him from hurting himself. When he saw Jesus he ran to him and bowed down in worship. Then Jesus had a conversation with the demons, named Legion, that inhabited the poor man, which

ended in their leaving the man for a herd of pigs. Not, as you will recall, a good result for the pigs! The story ends with the man sane and quiet, free from his madness begging Jesus to be allowed to follow him and be with him.

**S**uch a strange story! Demon pigs, graveyards and broken chains, madness—this story has all the elements of a Halloween film. However, in the midst of all of these bizarre effects, one of the oddest points of all in this old story often goes by completely unnoticed. What's really strange in this story is Jesus' final response to the newly-changed man, who has begged to remain with Jesus; Jesus refuses him.

Three times in these verses groups beg (*parakalein*) Jesus to do what they ask of him. First, in Mark 5:10 the demons beg Jesus not to send them out of the country; they beg him instead to let them enter a

*Why does Jesus refuse what appears to be not only a natural but even a beneficial request?*

nearby herd of swine. Jesus agrees and grants their request—not, by

the way, the wisest of requests, as the results amply and quite humorously demonstrate! Second, the people of the region, hearing what happened to the

demoniac and more importantly to the swine, beg Jesus to leave their country. Like so many people today, they respond in fear and rejection to something outside of their expectations or experience. Jesus clearly imperils their worldview, not to mention their economy, way too much. Again, Jesus agrees to their request and gets into his boat to leave. Third and finally, at the last minute the former demoniac himself, clothed, whole, and in his right mind, comes to Jesus and begs him to let him stay with Jesus as he goes on his way. Since Jesus granted the other two fear-filled and ill-conceived requests from the demons and the people, surely he will do so again for this calm, strong, transformed human being standing before him. But this time, unexpectedly, Jesus rejects what the man begs for. No, the former demoniac cannot stay with Jesus; no, this now sane, healthy, whole human being cannot remain in the company of the one who freed him.

**W**hy does Jesus refuse what appears to be not only a natural but even a beneficial request? Why does he refuse to let this wholly transformed man become one of his party? In Mark's gospel, Jesus has already accepted many other followers; indeed, the very first thing he did when he came into Galilee at the beginning of his mission was to call people to follow him. Jesus has even

---

*Why do we break old chains just to forge new ones?* designated 12 followers to be "with him" (Mk 3:14), the very thing the former demoniac now begs to be allowed to do. Surely, this man is now a worthy companion for Jesus' group. So, what's the problem here?

Jesus doesn't want the man to stay with him because Jesus wants him to do something else with his new life. Jesus commands the former demoniac, not to stay, but to go: "Go to your home and to your friends and tell them what the Lord has done for you." Go—

don't follow after me—go out to others. Time and again throughout the Gospel of Mark Jesus commands people whom he has healed to "Go." "Go in peace"; "go and tell"; "go on your way," but go, don't stay with me. And the demoniac does go. He goes out and preaches in the Greek cities of the Decapolis what Jesus has done for him. And the text tells us that everyone was amazed. Long before the 12 are sent out to preach in Mark, this demon-freed man preaches throughout the region, with great success, what Jesus has done for him.

I have a theory about why Jesus sends the former demoniac and so many other changed individuals in the Gospel of Mark out to preach, while keeping his rather—well, to be kind—spiritually-challenged disciples close by: the former demoniac no longer needs the constant presence of Jesus. Having been freed by Jesus from those old protective chains and fetters used to restrain his madness, he does not now need to replace them even with the light yoke of Jesus' company. Still the man himself wants to stay with his liberator, which I guess is an understandable response—there is a line from a folk song by Meg Christian I particularly like, in which she asks, "Why do we break old chains just to forge new ones?" Why indeed? Sometimes we do seem to crave the protective security of chains and bonds over the riskiness of freedom and responsibility, and sometimes we do prefer to beg for protection, to keep intact our "victim" role, rather than preach about our new freedom. The evil we know often seems more desirable than the freedom we don't know. But the demoniac is no longer a victim of his Legion of demons; he had no further need of chains, no matter how well intended; his life had been radically altered by his encounter with Jesus. In truth, he no longer needs a liberator, a comforter, a teacher, or a protector. He is now neither self-destructive

nor childish nor unable to cope with the living human world. He is whole, free, sane, and strong. He is in fact ready to go.

**S**o, why am I telling you this odd story of begging and preaching, chains and liberation? What does this story have to do with us, today, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people?

Rather a lot, I think. I believe that the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movements in the church today have arrived at a watershed moment, when the past we have known is passing away, when the victim role we have embraced is no longer needed or healthy. We need to recognize and applaud how far we have come: from invisibility to leadership, from persecution to ordination in the DOC, at least in some regions. I certainly don't mean to say that invisibility and persecution no longer exist, because as you all know

*I think this is a time when we need to stop begging and start preaching.*

very well, they do, but the difference between the

status of LGBT people 30 years ago and now is truly amazing, and those who have worked and suffered to make that journey happen should be praised by all of us. But this watershed moment is not only a time to remember and celebrate the past; it is even more importantly a time to map out the new strategies of the future. What is our task now? What is the Spirit now calling us to do? Now that the legion of demons who kept us in chains are on the run, even sometimes on the defensive, if not fully drowned, what task stands before our new lives in this new time? Like the former demoniac, I think this is a time when we need to stop begging and start preaching.

We do not need to beg for tolerance or acceptance any longer; instead we need to start preaching out of the truth, strength, and spiritual wisdom of our own experience. Like the former demoniac, our demons have

been cast out, often by our own efforts, the demons of homophobia and self-hatred that destroyed us and drove us mad; we have thrown off the chains of invisibility, with which our society and often even our families wished to bind us for our own protection, as they told us. We are whole, we are sane, we are mature spiritual and sexual people, led by the grace of God in Christ. In doing this work of God in the world, we are members of the family of Jesus; we are indeed the church—it is not now nor ever has it been up to other Christians to decide whether we should be included or not—we are the church and always have been. It is true, that just like the people of Gerasa in Mark's story, many people in the DOC today, when faced with things they don't expect and have not experienced themselves, respond with rejection and fear even when it means casting out the holy from among them. But their rejection and fear is not the will of God nor the nature of God's church. To treat their fears as if they did indeed define the boundaries of the body of Christ is not only to pander to profound spiritual weakness but far more seriously to distort the very church we all make up together.

**N**evertheless, the reason it is now time for us to stop begging and start preaching has little or nothing to do with the state of those other people, whether they like us or not, or even with the frantic, sometimes humorous antics of the many contemporary "demon pigs"—it has to do with us. We have changed, we are different—our personal demons are being cast out, our chains removed. We are victims no longer. Because we have been and are being transformed, our task in the world is a new task.

While the vocabulary of "welcome" has been extremely important for LGBT people in the church, it has also always had a problematic underside because it has tended to frame the issues by what easily

becomes, I think, a distorted and unfortunate image: that some are “insiders,” the owners of the house, with the right and power to decide who gets in the door and who doesn’t and others, mainly LGBT people are all outsiders, the guests, begging to be permitted entry or healing. But I don’t need someone else to decide to welcome me to a place where I have always been at home. That some in our churches have been encouraged to think they have the right to decide who can or cannot come to Jesus has led to a level of arrogance that is profoundly damaging to the individual spirit and to the church as a whole. Nobody gave permission for the demoniac to run to Jesus and fall on his knees in worship. He came because he recognized his liberator.

**N**ow, if we LGBT people of faith and our straight allies and neighbors recognize the liberation taking place within us; if we see the chains around our lives and hearts breaking up and fading away; if we know that the time for begging is now over; if we hear the Spirit calling us to a new task in the world, calling us to go and preach, ordained or not, then what word do we have to preach? And to whom do we preach it?

Now it is true that there are many spiritual seekers out there in the bars and clubs; we

---

*If we see the chains around our lives and hearts breaking up and fading away... then what word do we have to preach?*

meet them all the time. We have many LGBT friends and neighbors who need to hear the word of liberation

from the chains of self-hatred that still enslave their spirits. But I have to tell you, I think I have met more caring, humane, and gentle people in the bars and clubs and music festivals (I had to add a lesbian venue!) than I have often met in Christian churches. The church needs our preaching as much as, if not more than, the LGBT

communities.

Let’s be honest here: the churches in this country, many of them, most of them, are a mess! And it’s not just the Southern Baptists—my denomination, whether they like it or not—or Roman Catholics, or Church of Christ or the Assemblies of God; it’s the United Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Lutherans, the Disciples—even some Unitarians. At the very least, churches in this country are in the midst of a major identity crisis: they don’t know whether they are really political parties or social clubs or cut-rate psychotherapy groups or philanthropic foundations or affinity groups or the conservers of traditional values (values that never existed except in fantasy) or morning Karaoke venues or all of those things put together. But whatever they think they are, the vast majority of churches are not, as the feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp has repeatedly pointed out, places in which people are free to tell the truth about their own lives. And if the truth cannot be told, there is nothing that can set us free.

I believe that this watershed moment for LGBT people is also a time of crisis for Christianity. Many creative, committed and spiritually gifted people have been and are now leaving churches in disgust. When the church becomes a place where it is more comfortable to champion hatred than to speak out for justice, the moral capital of Christianity has seriously decayed. Who can be committed to a religion that mouths love and practices hatred? That proclaims compassion and practices rejection? That teaches inclusivity and practices exclusion?

**A**nd let’s be clear about this, the Bible is not to blame for this state of affairs. If the Bible’s few verses of possible reference to homoeroticism were really the source of the often violent polemic against lesbians and gay men, then the church should also be out there stoning adulterers,

condoning slavery, and refusing to tolerate, much less ordain, divorced people, for all of these other views are much clearer and much more widely attested in scripture than anything about homoeroticism. No, the source of hatred for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender persons is not biblical authority; it is, instead those twin pillars of violence: ignorance and fear—the ignorance of difference and the profound fear of sexuality. It is not LGBT people who need or want sympathy in this new moment—we are survivors, who have for millennia lived and loved in spite of inquisitions, holocaust, plagues, hatred, and discrimination.

*I believe churches in this time in history need LGBT people a lot more than LGBT people need churches.* As Micah says, God has made of us “who were cast off a strong nation.”

It’s the church that needs our sympathy; it’s Christianity we must attend to. We need to preach to the church, that’s the home country to which we are sent. “Go to your home and to your friends and tell them what the Lord has done for you.” Whether churches realize it or not, I believe churches in this time in history need LGBT people a lot more than LGBT people need churches.

But it will not be easy. In fact, it is and will be a fight. I think most of us have a tendency to want to avoid fights as much as possible. We long for those promised “win-win” scenarios so highly regarded in management textbooks. We don’t want the rancor, alienation, anger, and confrontation that fights — no matter how respectful — always bring with them. We really want everyone to live in harmony and peace. Here we need to remember the verse from 2 Timothy 4:7, the valediction on Paul’s life and work: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” This verse reminds us that some fights are “good fights,” one’s worthy of having, worthy of winning, worthy even of

risking one’s security, peace of mind, family, and friends. For Paul, fighting for the gospel of Jesus and its message of freedom from legalism, judgmentalness, and exclusion was manifestly a “good fight,” one worth devoting one’s life to winning, even if it meant he had to go up against Peter the Great Apostle and James the brother of Jesus. Paul knew that if judgmentalness and exclusion are left unhindered and unchallenged, the gospel of Christ itself will be the biggest loser of all.

I believe that this particular “good fight” in which LGBT people are now embroiled in within the DOC and many other denominations is a fight not only for the human dignity and profound Christian worthiness of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, but it is also a fight for the continuing moral credibility of Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

By supporting —on the basis of biblical warrant—the morality of slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the second-class status of women in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Christianity in this country lost many of its finest members, who left in disgust at the literal Bible reading which made some human beings feel completely justified in treating others, who were different from them, as much less than human. Paul’s warning to the Corinthians that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6) was utterly ignored in the rush to justify biblically exclusion, subordination, and hatred. Christianity in this country has still not recovered, I think, from the stupidity, arrogance, and moral blindness of these earlier calls to apply the “letter” of scripture to civil society. And now we are at it again.

Some Christians are citing their interpretations of a couple of obscure verses in the Bible (and I do mean “a couple” and I do mean “obscure” and I do mean “their interpretation”) to deny the civil rights and human dignity of LGBT people. Our legitimate desire, for example, to have

our faithful, long-term, loving relationships recognized by the state and blessed by the church is castigated by some conservatives—in a crazy reverse logic—as a move to destroy marriage itself. (If you want to see who is destroying marriage, you

*Will the moral capital of Christianity survive this current blatant use of it for political maneuvering, harassment and hate mongering against LGBT people?*

need look no further than many heterosexual couples, and Las Vegas would be a good place to

start your search). I truly know that lesbians, gay men, bisexual, and transgender people will survive all this present ruckus and will thrive, because, as I pointed out, we are survivors, and we have survived many worse things before. But will the moral capital of Christianity survive this current blatant use of it for political maneuvering, harassment and hate mongering against LGBT people? That I do not know. This particular “good fight” is one that must be joined not only by those who care about LGBT people, but also by those who care about the future of Christianity—because I believe that the future is what is truly at stake.

**B**ut, you know, I’m sure there are conservative Disciples out there who believe just as strongly that their battle to exclude LGBT people and their allies from the church body and from ordination is also the “good fight” that must be won to preserve their view of Christianity in all its purity and moral glory. One of the dividing lines between these groups comes down to very different understandings of that last phase in the 2 Timothy verse: what it means to “keep the faith.” “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.” What does it mean to “keep the faith”? I think for many conservative Christians, keeping the faith is a matter of trying to preserve some ideal

revered past that never really existed, some mythical time of perfect order and harmony. And that harmony for them has now come to require uniformity and unanimity. Everyone must believe and speak and act in the same way, and they or their leaders are the ultimate judges of what those beliefs and actions should be. I fear, in this scenario, that the Spirit that gives life has truly been frozen in amber, preserved there to be admired for its purity and the power that purity appears to give. Questioning, doubting, wrestling with God for that elusive blessing is absolutely discouraged. This “kept faith” must in their eyes be a *sure thing*, known, dependable, certain, and—rather like the proverbial “kept woman”—completely controllable.

In my world, and let me point out, the world of most of the early Christians, a “kept faith” is not keeping the faith. Indeed, it is not faith at all. Faith is above all risk taking; it’s messy, noisy, full of human despair and joy. Faith is alive, present, moving; faith is

*To keep this kind of faith, one has to keep moving with it.* surprising; it confounds the known. Do you think Paul

knew when he set out on the road to Damascus that he would be struck down by the words of Jesus? If he had, he would probably have stayed home! Faith is not predictable but surprising, undermining our prejudices and ignorance. To keep this kind of faith, one has to keep moving with it; you have to run that race that 2 Timothy mentions. To keep a faith like this we all have to get in the race; we can’t stand on the sidelines as observers. We have to pick up our water bottles and run—just to keep up with what God is doing in the world. To keep this dynamic faith we have to open ourselves to the unknown, to other human beings, to difference, to disagreement, to losing, and to the great gloriously diverse and richly patterned world that God has created.

This dynamic faith always points us to a new future, a future that is unknown except that God will be there, too. It requires us to risk everything in the present in order to reach that unknown future. Do you remember the story Jesus tells in both the gospels of Luke (19:12-27) and Matthew (25:14-30) about the ruler who left his country after dividing a great amount of

*Keeping the faith doesn't mean preserving it carefully in amber... it means risking faith in the economics of daily life... being willing to **not** be in control of what happens, and yet to act boldly anyway.*

money among his servants? When the ruler returned he asked each servant to account for the money entrusted to him. The first

one had doubled the money and was greatly rewarded; the second had done the same and was equally compensated. The last servant, fearing to lose the money, had — in Matthew's version—buried it in the ground. That last servant was condemned and cast into "outer darkness." Faith is like that as well. It has to be invested and spent in order to grow, but the rewards for that investment are enormous. On the other hand, if you are so afraid of losing your faith that all you can do is protect it, hem it in by many rules and bury it to keep it safe and unchanging, in the end you lose it and you lose yourself as well. Faith preserved is not faith. Faith must be invested in the world in order to grow.

So, keeping the faith doesn't mean preserving it carefully in amber for others to admire in the future; it means risking faith in the economics of daily life; it means being willing to **not** be in control of what happens, and yet to act boldly anyway and let the future develop as it will.

**K**eeping that kind of faith is what all of us are and will be called upon to do in the next months and years. This "good fight" is just beginning, I believe.

Indeed, I think that the next years will, if anything, be more nasty, more divisive, more violent than any we have seen so far. The apparent desire of the present political administration to make same-sex marriage a central campaign theme over and over again, presumably to divert the public's attention from troubling issues like the war in Iraq, the still stumbling economy, political bribe-taking, high gas prices, and the gigantic deficit, ensures that the rhetoric about LGBT people will continue hot and heavy in civil and church debates. When you consider the enormous financial reserves at the disposal of conservative right-wing organizations (Focus on Family's annual budget is 16 times larger than the budgets of all the national LGBT organizations put together!), you realize why the battle is mighty and vicious. In the short-term, I think LGBT issues will face constant and often successful backlash. From national movements for the Federal Marriage Amendment to local state-organized constitutional amendments to the new attacks on same-sex adoption practices, the meager civil rights LGBT people have been able to win will continue to be hotly contested issues.

**I**n the midst of this backlash, I think, there are two primary points that all of us must make again and again in these coming months:

(1) First, in relation to the debate over same-sex marriages, we must work constantly to impress on the public, including our friends, families, and fellow congregants that there are two distinct facets to marriage in this country that must be carefully distinguished from each other: sacred services performed by various faith communities on the one hand, and civil contracts witnessed, ratified, and filed with the state on the other. Same-gender couples have had the benefit of sacred rites within their faith communities for decades, in some cases. But none of these couples

are treated as legally married because those church ceremonies were not accompanied by state ratified contracts of marriage. Making same-gender marriage legal will do absolutely *nothing* to faith communities. Those who currently perform unions will continue to do so, and those who don't, will continue to be free to refuse. The only difference will be in the legal standing of the couples in relationship to state and national laws. Most Americans, it seems, do not really recognize or understand this

---

*Keeping and preaching the faith into the future is always a risk.* distinction between civil contract and sacred rites.

Unlike many European countries where couples have two separate ceremonies, one at the city clerk's office and one in the church, in this country we let pastors act as both religious functionaries and civil clerks *at the same time*. Consequently, many Americans don't realize that the religious service is *not* what "marries" them in the eyes of the state but instead the signing of the civil contract. Because most Americans don't realize this distinction, they believe that religious groups and church spokespeople should have the right to determine who can and who cannot get married. This lack of clarity about the dual nature of marriage has to be changed, if same-gender marriage is to have any chance of succeeding.

I think many of you who are pastors are in especially good positions to make this important distinction clear. Some of you might even want to consider joining the movement of pastors who are no longer willing to also act as agents of the state by signing marriage licenses, thereby forcing couples to have two ceremonies. But whatever you do or don't do, continually making the distinction between the civil and sacred aspects of marriage is an essential educational effort for these next several years.

(2) The second point we all need to be making is that Christianity, like other faith communities, does not speak with one voice. The religious right has been very successful in selling their version of Christianity as the only "right" version. We must become ever more vocal and visible as equally "right" Christians who see the teachings of Jesus and the church in very different ways from Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and company. We must work to reclaim the voice of the gospel for social justice for LGBT people. We cannot continue to let Christianity go to the one with the most money or the greatest media access. We need to flaunt our views, our lives, and our loves as we never have before, and most importantly, we need to flaunt ourselves as Christians, Christian leaders, not Christian victims, preachers, not beggars.

**T**hese two points are vital to make in the short-term future of backlash, debate, and political posturing. What happens after that is harder to predict. There is a wonderful quote from Mahatma Gandhi that I am sure many of you know, about the course of movements for human liberation. Gandhi said, "First, they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."

I wish I had a crystal ball that would tell me when that "win" will take place for LGBT people and their allies and neighbors in the DOC and other faith communities, and society-at-large. All I do know is that keeping and preaching the faith into the future is always a risk, but it is a risk I hope all of us are willing to take. Many people have run this race ahead of us and many are running it with us still, and many may have to run it after we are gone. When each of us comes to the end of our time, my hope and prayer is that we each, like Paul, may honestly be able to say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."