

Being an Outrageous Christian
Luke 10:25-37

If you've been a fan of the long running late night comedy show Saturday Night Live, then you might remember a character on that show from back in the late 80's early 90's called "The Church Lady"

The Church Lady had her own little TV show segment and when it came on organ music played, nice light filtered in through a stained glass window and she sat staunch and upright in a nice chair next to a side table with a flower arrangement on it.

She would comment on and talk about social changes, celebrities and such from her outdated moral perspective and the highlight was always when she would ask the question about what was really behind all these things and would she say "could it be... Satan?!" and give pointed stern look into the camera.

We all laughed at it, this caricature of how the church and Christians are portrayed. Outdated, out of touch, organs and stained glass actually thinking that there existed a devil who ran around causing mischief like some fairy tale imp.

But on a deeper level it's no laughing matter because it reflects the view of a society who no longer takes the church and the Christian faith seriously but views it at best nostalgically and at worst irrelevant to what goes on in our lives.

You can find many other stereotypes of Christians out there – maybe you've even run across some in people you know.

When I was in my last year of high school, I told one of my classmates I was planning on studying to be a minister and his response was "you're going to make a career out of making people feel guilty?"

So as we look at how to become a person who spreads the Christian faith, we need to be honest and recognize that we are not simply trying to influence “neutral” people.

Instead we are working in a context that is either hostile or indifferent and the people in that context have all sorts of prejudices and stereo-types about Christianity.

Christianity is a kill-joy, they don’t think, it oppresses women, it limits your sexuality, it’s intolerant, they are just after your money, etc.... and the problems with stereo-types is that while they are not true across the board, but there is always a cause for them somewhere.

Now God’s people have always struggled with being stereo-typed, part of that comes from what we read about this morning, that God commanded the nation of Israel not to act like the other nations around them.

So as Israel struggled to stay separate and avoid the idolatry of the surrounding nations they began to be viewed as peculiar

and exclusive, difficult and obstinate and by the time Jesus arrived on the scene their leaders had taken God’s grace in choosing them, delivering them from Egypt, and giving them His law and they had made it into a trophy of their worthiness.

So the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the teachers of the law perpetrated the exclusive and legalistic stereo-types that the Jews were known for in the ancient world, not only with outsiders but even within among their own people.

This presents a problem for God’s plan to save the world because while it is true God chose Israel over all the other nations in the world, it was so that they could be a light to all the other nations in the world, and not an obstacle.

When Christ comes to offer salvation to all people, these stereo-types are going to get in the way and undermine the message. So how does Christ get past this?

The answer is by being Outrageous.

Being Outrageous shatters stereo-types and disarms prejudices and clears the way for people to hear the real message which needs to be communicated.

So let's look at how this is happening in the Parable of the Good Samaritan

It occurs because a teacher of the Law wanted to challenge Jesus. He wanted a chance to show off his skills and come away with being recognized at the very least as a teacher to be reckoned with, and at best as someone whom Jesus was forced to admit lived a godly life, this would be a public honor.

So he asks a leading question – What must I do to inherit eternal life? Hoping Jesus will answer and set him up to show off his godly lifestyle.

But Jesus doesn't fall for it – Instead he throws the question back at him? How do you read the law on that matter? Since you want to impress us all with your knowledge go ahead.

So the Teacher gives a great answer. Total devotion to God and love your neighbor as yourself.

“You're right” Jesus says “Do this and you will live” He is ready to drop the matter and move on. But the teacher hasn't got what he wanted from the challenge yet so he presses the matter, Come'on Jesus set me up to look good in front of everyone – so he asks “Who is my neighbor?”

He thinks perhaps Jesus will say “everyone else who acts as good as you do, who keeps God's law...” This would commend him for his exclusion, exalt him and dishonor all those in the crowd who are not good Jews.

At this point the stereo-types come into play. Will Jesus answer show him to be the same as the Jewish leaders who perpetrated the stereotypes?

Exclusive, harsh, judgmental on those who can't keep the law? What will this do to his message of offer grace and forgiveness to those who know they need it?

It's time to be Outrageous! So Jesus tells a story which shocks everyone.

A story that turns everything upside down – the story of the Good Samaritan, it's a story which portrays the religious leaders as not caring for the average Israelite, and shames them by showing how a hated outsider – Samaritan, does a better job of caring than they do.

By telling this story Jesus shows that He is not like the teachers of the law, He does not shy away from associating with people who were considered unclean and sinners – but not because they are somehow not really sinners or unclean, that they really haven't done anything wrong and they've been misjudged by the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law - no, these people are guilty of wrong doing and sin...

But that is exactly why they need Jesus' help.

When Luke put together his gospel, He wanted to include this episode in Jesus ministry because Luke had a special concern

to bring the good news about Jesus to those who were considered outsiders by the Jewish people.

Luke includes this story so that Gentiles, women, and others can see that although Jesus is a Jew, he is not like the other Jews who looked at them with contempt.

Luke is concerned that these stereo-types and prejudices don't prevent outsiders from hearing about Jesus, understanding why they need Him, and believing that God will extend forgiveness to them through Jesus Christ, so he includes this outrageous story.

So Jesus did it, Luke did it, what about us?

Are we willing to flip things upside down in order to be Outrageous Christians, in order to break down stereo-types, and prejudices people have about Christians so that the message about Jesus Christ can get through?

So I want to walk you through a couple of examples of how we can do this, be Outrageous and flip things upside down in how you act so you can disarm the stereo-types you bump up against the people you are trying to influence.

So – a prominent stereo-type that we have to deal with today is the “Nice Person stereo-type.”

Many people think that a Christian is basically a nice person who doesn’t rock the boat, or cause conflict, someone who wouldn’t actually act outrageous and challenge stereo-types.

The result is that people don’t take us, or the church, or the message we give very seriously.

But as you’ve heard me say before, following Jesus is not about being a nice person who is nice to other nice people.

As we heard in our scripture reading, following Jesus is about loving God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind – total devotion to God.

It’s about a lifestyle which integrates what we hear on Sunday with how we live, do business, interact with others, make our decisions and set our priorities during the week.

So we flip this upside down by being honest instead of being nice.

We need to be upfront that our primary allegiance lies with the Kingdom of God. We need to do business honestly, serve people not screw them over, We must stand up for those who are oppressed, ask the hard questions about how things impact the creation and others around us, and remind people that we are all accountable to God for our actions and lives.

This is not always nice, but it is Christian - and if we stand up as ambassadors for the Kingdom’s interests as God calls us to, then we are presenting Jesus as the bible presents him and as we learned last week - others begin to take us and our message about him seriously.

This Jesus always produces a reaction – love him or hate him...

Another stereo-type that is very common today – and seems to be growing - is that Christians, especially “Evangelical Christians,” are an alt-right political reactionary group.

So we need to clarify that as we flip the stereo-type of being a “nice person” on its head, and stand up as Kingdom Ambassadors this does not mean that we walk around with a “religious chip” on our shoulder looking for someone to pick a fight with whoever doesn’t see things God’s way. We are God’s ambassadors, not his defenders. God can defend himself.

So as we overcome the “Nice Christian” stereo-type by speaking up for Kingdom interests we also need to overcome and avoid the “Reactionary Christian” stereo-type by engaging others in dialogue.

We listen and understand and learn from others so that they might listen and learn and understand the truth of God’s Kingdom from us.

And if they are not willing to listen and dialogue – then flip the reactionary stereo-type on its head and walk away.

Jesus gave his disciples some additional outrageous wisdom for situations like this in Mathew 7:6, he said *“Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces...”*

So, these are outrageous actions that we can engage in that help us to flip stereo-types on their head.

Speaking up and standing up is outrageous to those who think Christianity is just a religion for nice people.

Engaging in dialogue with is equally outrageous to those who think Christians shouldn’t speak, or do anything that might look like compromise with those who are opposed to God’s kingdom.

So are you willing to be outrageous?

Now, brothers and sisters – let me offer one final word of caution about being outrageous.

We are not to be outrageous simply for the sake shocking people or because we enjoyment breaking stereo-types.

We do this because stereo-types about Christianity hinder the message of Jesus Christ from reaching the people who need to hear it...

We need to overcome these barriers by being outrageous and flipping them upside down – for the sake of the gospel.

Now - I don't know what sort of other stereo-types you might encounter as you GO-OUT and are courageous and contagious with the people around you... but when you encounter them – just remember the basic principle of dealing with them is to flip them upside down.

If people think Christians are boring – work at being exciting,

If they think you will be judgmental – show them you are gracious, if they think you are mindless – let them see how logical it is to think like Christ.

So brothers and sisters – in order to keep yourself ready to be outrageous, to know how to be outrageous to fit the situation it's important that you are regularly studying the bible, spending time in prayer and worship, and are being filled with the Holy Spirit.

When the Holy Spirit directs us to be Outrageous – is it not simply being outrageous for the sake of being shocking, but it truly can come from our experience of Christ forgiving us for the things we have done to contribute to these stereo-types which hinder the gospel.

Scripture reminds us that in Christ all these stereo-types have already been flipped upside down, and really it's just Christ's outrageous life that needs to be made visible in ours by co-operating with the Holy Spirit.

Just like Jesus' life was made visible in an experience that Tony Campolo, a well-known author and speaker had many years ago when he was at a conference in Hawaii.

Because of the time change Tony can't sleep and he's hungry. So he gets up and goes looking for something that's open at 3 am and all he can find is a grungy dive in an alley.

As he is sitting there munching on his donut and sipping a black coffee – a group of prostitutes walk in and sit down around him.

Tony is a bit uncomfortable – they are loud and provocative, so he gulps down his coffee, planning to make a quick getaway.

But then the woman next to him says to her friend, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." Her friend replies "So what! What d'ya want from me Agnes? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?"

The first woman says, "I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday

party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When Tony Campolo heard that, he waited around until the women left, and then he asked the guy behind the counter if they came in the diner every night.

"Yeah," he said, "that's Agnes and her friends there here every night. been comin' here for years. Why do you want to know?"

"Because Agnes said that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think? Do you think we could maybe throw a little birthday party for her right here in the diner?"

A smile crept over the man's face. "That's great," he says, "yeah, that's great. I like it." He turns to the kitchen and shouts to his wife,

"Hey, come on out here. This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow is Agnes' birthday and he wants to throw a party for her right here."

His wife comes out. "That's terrific," she says. "You know, Agnes is really nice. She's always trying to help other people and nobody does anything nice for her."

So they make their plans. Tony says he'll be back at 2:30am the next morning with some decorations and the man, whose name turns out to be Harry, says he'll make a cake.

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony is back. He has crepe paper and other decorations and a sign made of big pieces of cardboard that says, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" They decorate the place from one end to the other and get it looking great.

Harry had gotten the word out on the streets about the party and by 3:15 it seemed that every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door swings open and in walks Agnes and her friend. Tony has everybody ready. They all shout and scream "Happy Birthday, Agnes!"

Agnes is absolutely flabbergasted. She's stunned, her mouth falls open, her knees started to buckle, and she almost falls over.

And when the birthday cake with all the candles is carried out, that's when she totally loses it. Now she's sobbing and crying. Harry, who's not used to seeing a prostitute cry, gruffly mumbles, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Cut the cake."

So she pulls herself together and blows them out. Everyone cheers and yells, "Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake!"

But Agnes looks down at the cake and, without taking her eyes off it, slowly and softly says, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if...I mean, if I don't...I mean, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry doesn't know what to say so he shrugs and says, "Sure, if that's what you want to do. Keep the cake. Take it home if you want."

"Oh, could I?" she asks. Looking at Tony she says, "I live just down the street a couple of doors; I want to take the cake home, is that okay? I'll be right back, honest."

She gets off her stool, picks up the cake, and carries it high in front of her like it was the Holy Grail. Everybody watches in stunned silence and when the door closes behind her, nobody seems to know what to do. They look at each other. They look at Tony.

So Tony gets up on a chair and says, "What do you say that we pray together?"

And there they are in a hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, half the prostitutes in Honolulu, at 3:30 a.m. listening to Tony Campolo as he prays for Agnes, for her life, her health, and her salvation.

Tony recalls, "I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her."

When he's finished, Harry leans over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he says, "Hey, you never told me you was a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?"

In one of those moments when just the right words came, Tony answers him quietly, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry thinks for a moment, and in a mocking way says, "No you don't. There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. Yep, I'd join a church like that."

Friends, are you ready to let the Holy Spirit lead you to be Outrageous for the sake of Jesus Christ and the gospel?

Let's pray.