

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Several communities around the country have recently passed new laws making it illegal to prohibit residents from having certain breeds of dogs as pets. About fifteen years ago, in response to several highly publicized horrible dog attacks on both adults and children, certain dog breeds were designated as too dangerous to be allowed as household pets. Most notably Pit Bulls, but also Staffordshire Terriers, Rottweilers, and other large breeds. Big dogs were tarred with the same brush of being “dangerous” and “vicious” by nature, and so they were banned in some communities. Repealing these earlier laws acknowledges what owners of “banned breeds” have always known—there are no inherently “bad dogs,” but there are bad dog owners.

To slap a universal and derogatory label on an entire group is called stereotyping or profiling. But that seems to be more rampant than ever. Don't believe me? Let's go on Yahoo and do a search asking the open-ended question, “Why are Christians so” Let's let the search engine answer for us that questions and finish our inquiry. Based on the history of the most recent searches, the list of options is startling.

<< Ask Ben to bring it up on the worship screens >>

<< As of May 11, a Yahoo search brings up the following responses: judgmental, hateful, stupid, mean, intolerant, annoying, self-righteous, ignorant, unhappy, and arrogant >>

What we see on the screen is a ranking of the most frequently searched questions on the internet. Now, as you look at this list and as you look around the others in the room this morning, do you see people who fit these descriptions? If you were to look in a mirror, would your reflection match any of these descriptions?

Yet, these terms describe how too many people in our society view the church, the body of Christ, which is not a building, but a people. Is this now how the world truly sees those who call themselves “Christian?” How has this happened, that the world sees us this way? Is the world becoming biased towards Christians? Or have we done this to ourselves?

It is true that Christians have done some very bad things. The 17th century French scientist and theologian Blaise Pascal gave a famous warning that humans never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they act from religious conviction. The perversion of the best yields the worst, just as the inverse of the word “live” is “evil.” Don’t ask what happened to the bodies of the 950 children who died in the care of the Beesborough Mother and Baby Catholic Home in Cork, Ireland.

We’ve seen a marked increase in the number of people who either have no faith, “the nones” or who have given up on faith, “the dones.” The dones are people who have burnt out on their faith or who have become turned off by what they see as hypocrisy or they don’t see evidence of the faith being practiced. A recent survey commissioned just up the road in Knox County (Knoxville, TN) put that combined number at around 54%. In other words, they are not seeing people who claim to be Christian actually imitating Christ and living as if their faith makes a difference in their life. In other words, they aren’t seeing Christians walking the walk that they talk.

Our scripture from Acts this morning, tells the story of Tabitha (or Dorcas, in Greek), a disciple of Christ living in Joppa, a seaport town that is on the outskirts of present day Tel Aviv, Israel. When we are introduced to Tabitha, she has just died. Her death was met with great sadness in the community because she was such an ardent follower of Christ. She took to heart the teaching of Christ to love others. She put that love of others to work by creating clothing for those in need, using her talent as a seamstress to serve Christ. As the scripture tells us, “She was devoted to good works and acts of charity” (Acts 9:36). She truly walked the walk of living out her faith. She imitated Jesus as she did works for the poor and the widows, who were with her, mourning her death.

Peter was in a nearby town when Tabitha died. The faithful hear that he is nearby, know of his relationship with the living Lord, and send for him to come. Do they expect him to perform some miracle? Did they expect him to raise her from the dead. Did Peter? They knew that Peter would know what to do. Sometimes, when we don’t know what to expect, we need to believe that we can turn to God for help knowing that God will not abandon us.

When Peter arrives, he does what he knows to do. He imitates Jesus. He asks the corners to leave the room. He prays. In a scene that replicates what Peter had seen Jesus do earlier, he turns to the body of Tabitha, calls out to her to get up, and she awakens. By imitating Jesus, a miracle happened that day. Tabitha was alive and led many to believe in the Lord.

One of my favorite Christian authors and speakers is Tony Campolo, a retired professor of sociology at Eastern College in St. David’s, PA. A few years ago, Tony flew to Hawaii to speak at a conference. The way he tells it, he checks into his hotel and tries to get some sleep. Unfortunately, his internal clock wakes

him at 3:00 a.m. The night is dark, the streets are silent, the world is asleep, but Tony is wide awake, and his stomach is growling.

He gets up and prowls the streets looking for a place to get some bacon and eggs for an early breakfast. Everything is closed except for a grungy dive in an alley. He goes in and sits down at the counter. The fat guy behind the counter comes over and asks, "What d'ya want?"

Well, seeing the appearance of the diner (and the appearance of the cook) Tony isn't so hungry anymore so eying some donuts under a plastic cover he says, "I'll have a donut and black coffee."

As he sits there munching on his donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30, in walk eight or nine provocative, loud prostitutes just finished with their night's work. They plop down at the counter and Tony finds himself uncomfortably surrounded by this group of smoking, swearing hookers. He gulps his coffee, planning to make a quick getaway. Then the woman next to him says to her friend, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." To which her friend nastily replies, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?"

The first woman says, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to put me down? 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?" Well, when Tony Campolo heard that, he said he made a decision. He sat and waited until the women left, and then he asked the fat guy at the counter, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah," he answered.

"The one right next to me," he asked, "she comes in every night?"

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

"Because she just 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 cute kind of smile crept over the fat man's chubby cheeks. "That's great," he says, "yeah, that's great. I like it." He turns to the kitchen and shouts to his wife, "Hey Sheila, 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."

Sheila comes out. "That's terrific," she says. "You know, Agnes is really nice. I know what she does for a living and everything, but she's one of the good people. 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 2:30 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. There were hookers wall to wall.

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 and show it to my mother, 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."

And Tony said to him, "That's where you're wrong Harry. A man came a long time ago and set up a church just like that. Let me tell you about him. His name is Jesus."¹

Imitating Christ. Sharing that amazing thing called Grace.

It makes a difference in the lives of the people that we touch. It makes a difference in our life as well as we grow closer to being who Christ calls us to be.

As we prepare to close out this year together, it is my prayer that we can continue to seek ways in which we, as a congregation and as individual believers, can imitate Christ right here in Rossville. The need is great, but we can make a difference.

Let's make it so.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story: Life Lessons from Unexpected Places and Unlikely People* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2000), 216-20