

Scandalous Grace

sermon digest

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Joshua 6:22-25; Luke 7:36-37, 44-48

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Tony Campolo is one of the more popular evangelical preachers of our time. Perhaps that can be explained. Preaching is his avocation. He makes his living as a professor of sociology at Eastern College in Pennsylvania. He has an enviable freedom in the pulpit, suggesting that he is not going to have to answer to a church board after every sermon. As a sociologist, or perhaps a Christian, Campolo preaches the social gospel that sometimes causes shock waves to ripple through our heads. At the 2004 Mynatt Retreat he told a story about conducting the funeral of one of the first AIDS victims in his area. Local pastors were not available. Like the deceased, friends at the funeral were homosexuals who had been rejected by the church, and he told about the spontaneous worship that broke out at the graveside as they asked for the reading of familiar passages from the Bible. Campolo suggested to the Baptist ministers at the retreat that some of us may need a retake on the gospel.

One of Campolo's favorite stories, the lead sermon in *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*, is about a trip to Honolulu. Jet lag caused difficulty sleeping, so he took a walk at 3:00 AM and stopped at an all-night diner for a cup of coffee. To his discomfort, a group of prostitutes invaded his privacy and engaged in boisterous conversation. He overheard one of the women say that she was turning 39 the next day and she had never had a birthday party. Campolo decided to throw a party for Agnes. He worked it out with Harry the manager, and showed up the next morning at 2:30 with a birthday cake. After the birthday party Agnes took the remaining cake and left. Breaking the silence, Tony suggested that the rest of the prostitutes join him in prayer. Shocked to learn that Campolo was a preacher, Harry asked what kind of church he was from. Tony answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning." In his book, Campolo elaborates, "that's the kind of church that Jesus came to create!"

Grace is a scandalous. The preacher sociologist may be onto something. Luke tells one of those farfetched Campolo-like stories about a party at the house of Simon the Pharisee. A woman "who was a sinner" crashes the party, washes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, anoints his feet with an ointment and kisses his feet. Simon is offended. No real prophet would allow such a woman to touch him. Jesus offers a parable and shocks Simon with the moral lesson: "her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is questioned by good religious folks for his association with sinners and tax collectors. The accusation, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" stands at the entrance to the story of Simon the Pharisee.

In Hebrews 11:31 the biographies of faith trip over a questionable heroine—Rahab the prostitute. It's a war story. Rahab was not only a prostitute, but a Canaanite, a Gentile, the enemy. When Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Rahab hid the Jewish spies sent to check out the city. She also lied to the authorities, hid the spies on her roof, and helped them to escape. When Jericho fell, Joshua spared Rahab and her family to live happily ever after with the nation Israel. One has to wonder what the likes of Rahab is doing among champions of faith like Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. She is the only other woman than Sarah. Perhaps more sense can be made of her intrusion into the ranks of the righteous when we find that she is listed by Matthew in the genealogy of Jesus, but nowhere do we find any record in Joshua of her changing profession. In fact, "the prostitute" is part of her name.

The oldest profession is never treated like a virtuous choice in either Testament. Despite the suggestions in Dan Brown's fiction *The Da Vinci code* and the Nikos Kazantzakis novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the Gospels never suggest that Jesus winked at prostitution or lends validity to the assumption that Mary Magdalen was a prostitute or Jesus' lover. The moments of grace emerged because most prostitution in biblical times, like much of the world today, was a means of survival for throwaway women. Today, sexual slavery accounts for a large portion of global prostitution, especially in poor countries. In some cultures, prostitution is the last recourse for divorced women. Regardless of the cause, the sex trade depends on customers and would not exist without men to sustain the profession.

A few years ago, I created a lot of anxiety in the church when I did a study of sex in the Bible. I found that folks did not want to hear or talk about it, at least not in public and certainly not in church. After observing the multiple wives and concubines of the Patriarchs, 1,000 in the harem of Solomon, and stories of men offering their daughters to save themselves, I commented that the Bible may be the last place you will want to go to find models of sexual behavior for our children. The Jewish-Christian move to an ethic of responsible sexual commitment and fidelity in marriage was a step in the right direction. In spite of the offensive content, the Bible is a lot more comfortable with human sexuality than later church history. Much of the later emphasis on the virginity of Mary related to distaste for normal human procreation. Augustine taught that original sin was transmitted through sexual intercourse. Sin became a three-letter word beginning with S and

ending in X, without regard to marriage or commitment to the other.

Both Jews and Christians have had difficulty in finding a worthy application for the Old Testament book Song of Songs. The blatant, near pornographic references to the love of a man and woman were generally treated as allegory, the relationship of God and the church.

The Greek word is *skandalon*, an obstacle or stumbling block. Paul addresses the scandal of Christ in the word of the cross, but the real issue for religious, moral people is the scandal of grace. Somehow, we have a need to punish people who either choose or are forced into a lifestyle that we find offensive. That God could possibly forgive such sins and find meaningful vocation for such people is pure scandal.

The love of God is unconditional. Just about the time we begin to feel comfortable with throwing stones at folks who are different, Rahab turns up. Her profession becomes even worse in light of the temple prostitution common among Jewish neighbors. If she was involved in the oldest profession because of poverty, we might understand, but what if Rahab was a temple prostitute? Religious prostitution was offensive to Jews, not so much because of morality, but for theological reasons. Sexual misconduct in pagan temples was a way of making offering to the gods of fertility. The issue was not sex; it was idolatry. As offensive as the practice of temple prostitution and Canaanite identity became in Israel, Joshua includes a measure of grace toward Rahab.

Rahab is not really alone in the biblical saga. We are reminded of the story of Ruth, the Moabite woman, who after her husband's death sticks with her mother-in-law Naomi and eventually seduces Boaz to become her second husband. The word of a compassionate God kept getting in between the lines of the stories of the exclusive people. What about Gomer, the wife of Hosea? The story is an appalling account of Hosea's calling from God to choose a prostitute wife. True, the marriage is living parable to get a message across to Israel about the national problem of idolatry. Yet, you cannot escape the love story here of a man who will not give up on his wife, even when she returns to the brothel. Periodically, the stories of the Bible make a radical turn just to check out our moral compass, and I don't think that the concern here is to be sure that we are appropriately offended with the sex trade. Somehow the message keeps getting through that God's grace extends to everyone, especially sinners, and maybe even to those of us who are so clean that we do not recognize that Rahab is one of us.