

Sermon: A Church Like That
Scripture: Acts 2:1-11
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: June 4, 2017

Our daughter, Naomi, is graduating from Winchester High this weekend and so my folks are here visiting us and as many of you know my father is a retired minister. I grew up listening him preach and his sermons were often filled with wonderful stories that he would tell. I realized that I don't tell stories in my sermons very often like my dad did. I don't know why, maybe needing to carve my own path up here in the pulpit different from him (no offense dad) but I thought today with him being here and with having come across a really good story this past week... I thought I would share one with you this morning, one that here on Pentecost Sunday reminds us of what the church is supposed to be about.

For essentially we have to remember - as evidenced in all those names that Haliana did a great job pronouncing - that the church began as a language-barrier breaking, boundary-busting, wall-breaching, border-crossing, comfort-zone quashing, in-group annihilating, outsider incorporating, enemy-embracing, unity-forming movement of love. Really! That's the effect that the Spirit had on the people the Spirit chose to light on fire! They talked to people they shouldn't be talking to, welcomed in people they shouldn't in their right mind have welcomed, they did not defer to the authorities they should have deferred to, they touched the untouchables, they reached the unreachable, they loved the unloveables, and... why? Because they followed Jesus, of course, because they were a church like that... Speaking of which...

One of the most famous Baptist preachers and religious commentators of our time is a man you might have heard of named Rev. Tony Campolo. He's an evangelical pastor who is dynamic and engaging and is often called upon to represent Christianity on talk shows like Nightline, Crossfire, Larry King Live, The Colbert Report, and many others. A few years back he flew to Hawaii to speak at a conference. As he tells the story, he checks into his hotel and tries to get some sleep, but his internal clock is still on Eastern time, so he wakes up 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. So he gets up and prowls the streets looking for a place to get some bacon and eggs for an early breakfast. Everything is closed in that part of town except for a really grungy dive in an alley. He goes in and sits down at the counter, hesitant to touch the menu. And a big gruff-looking guy behind the counter comes over and asks, "What d'ya want?" Somehow Tony isn't so hungry anymore and isn't sure he'd trust anything coming out of that kitchen anyway. So eyeing some pastries sealed in cellophane he says, "I'll have a donut and black coffee" figuring that's probably safest.

As he sits there munching on his donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30 AM, in walk eight or nine provocative, loud prostitutes just finished with their night's work. They plop down at the counter like they own the place, and Tony finds himself uncomfortably surrounded by this group of loud, smoking, swearing hookers. He gulps his coffee, planning to make a quick getaway when 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 expect a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I want one now?"

When Tony Campolo heard that, his heart was moved, and he started thinking. He waited until the women left, and then he asked the 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. 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 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, 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 2:30 the next morning with some decorations and he'll buy a cake somewhere. But the big guy whose name turns out to be Harry looks at his wife and says to Tony, "Naw, you bring the decorations. We'll make the cake!"

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony is back. He has crepe paper and other decorations and a big cardboard poster that says, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" They decorate the place from one end to the other and get it looking great. Harry and his wife had gotten the word out on the streets about the party and by 3:15 it seems like every prostitute in Honolulu is in the place. At 3:30 on

the dot, the door swings open and in walks Agnes and her friend. They all shout and scream “Happy Birthday, Agnes!” Agnes is absolutely flabbergasted. She's stunned. Her mouth falls open, her knees start 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, or I'll have to do it.” So she pulls herself together and blows them out. Everyone cheers and yells, “Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake!” Harry gives her a big knife and sets out a stack of plates.

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. It's your 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 like it was the Holy Grail, slowly marching through the room with it high in front of her for everyone to see. She carried her treasure out the door and everyone in the room watches in stunned silence. When the door closes behind her, nobody seems to know what to do.

There's a birthday party with no guest of honor and no birthday cake. They look at each other. They look at Tony. And Tony, Baptist preacher that he is, can't resist. He gets up on a chair and says, “What do you say we pray together?” And there they are in this hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, half the

prostitutes in Honolulu, at 3:30 in the morning, listening to Tony Campolo as he prays for Agnes; for her life, her health, and her salvation. He prays that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her. When Tony finishes, 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?” Tony pauses and says quietly, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.” Harry thinks for a moment, and 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.”

The scriptures are clear, the Spirit of God is a prostitute-honoring, criminal-visiting, outsider-welcoming, class-race-gender breaking power of love in this world. Are we going to be a people like that? Are we going to be a church like that?