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# Outrageous Humility

Philippians 2.1-13

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 25, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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“This is an outrage.” “You’re outrageous.”

To say, “This is an outrage,” is to tell someone that their brazen manners, or their unfashionable opinions, lie beyond our accepted social norms and evoke righteous anger. To say, “You’re outrageous” (in such a way that it rhymes with “gorgeous”), is to affirm that a person’s unambiguous language or provocative clothing is not unwelcome to you – even though it constitutes shameless flirtation.

I want to look with you at two kinds of outrage this morning, both of which dally on this same boundary between the unacceptable and the intriguing. The first is a familiar question. What made John Franklin Crowell think that lowly Trinity College in Randolph County, North Carolina had a big future and needed to be uprooted forthwith and transplanted to Durham? What made William Preston Few and James B. Duke think they could just build a medieval-looking campus with a host of research schools and turn Trinity College into a major university overnight? What in 1984 made Terry Sanford speak of Duke’s “outrageous ambition” to build the best faculty in the world within two decades?

Who did these people think they were? We all know that Harvard, Yale, Princeton and the rest had long ago booked their seats at the heavenly banquet of American higher education – and it’s been a good long time since anyone was issuing invitations to join them for dinner. We all know that the South that John Franklin Crowell inhabited in 1887 was regarded by the rest of the country as crushed, disease-ridden, racist and backward, and those kinds of labels hung around long into the twentieth century and haven’t entirely gone away even now. What kind of arrogance, conceit, and unscrupulous deal-fixing did these outrageous people think they could get away with?

And yet you have to be intrigued by this kind of vision. It’s not simply unacceptable. It’s provocative in an attractive, even seductive kind of a way. It sends a shiver down your spine. It puts its finger on Duke’s unique appeal: we get to be the little guy, the country cousin, late to the party, but we also get to be the big powerhouse – all at the same time. Here we are in Duke Chapel, a building that epitomizes that outrageous ambition lodged in the heart of a people who still can’t quite believe

we're invited to the banquet. And doesn't it say to you, every time you walk into it, "You know, we could go to heaven, too."

Let's turn to the second kind of outrage, this time with a less familiar question. "Who ever got it into their head that Christianity could become a popular, mainstream, religion?" At first glance this is a counterintuitive question. Surely Christianity is the very definition of a popular, mainstream religion. Surely in the good old days when America was happy and prosperous and no one needed to pay any taxes and every child did what its parents told them and the sun always shone, everyone was a Christian. Surely every Jew and Muslim and Hindu and Buddhist today realizes that to be an acceptable religious person you have to conform to the Christian template. Surely Christianity exists to provide the moral framework that makes this country function effectively. Surely Christian is a synonym for normal.

To perceive the absurdity of these assumptions is to recognize how far we've come from the world of St Paul. When Paul outlines in his letter to the Philippians what it means to be a Christian, he's not describing a lifestyle that's ever likely to garner much popular appeal. "Think the way Jesus thinks," he says. "And this is the way Jesus thinks: first of all he becomes a slave. Then he makes himself subject to an untimely death. And, worse even than that, he allows himself to be put to death on a cross."

In case the significance of this outrageous threefold injunction isn't crystal clear, let me take away any ambiguity. To be a slave is to have all your freedom taken away, to undergo a punishing and unrewarded existence, to obey a master for whom you likely have little respect and who doubtless treats you with contempt, and to assume the lowest social status of all. To face death is to become subject to the end of consciousness, the height of fear and total loss of control. To undergo death on a cross is to experience the ultimate in physical pain and social shame, to undergo both agony and ridicule at the same time. Paul puts these three aspects of Jesus' example together and calls them "humility." What does humility mean? It literally means to be on the ground – the humus (in Latin), the earth. It means to grovel, to be face down, to be humbled, to have no source of pride, no leg to stand on.

What can Paul be thinking? It's like some kind of a horror movie. Maybe your parents prayed with you at bedtime and you thought Jesus would make you safe in the land of the shadows and the scary night-time noises. Maybe as a child your Sunday School teacher said Jesus would always be there for you and was the friend of little children. Maybe your youth leader fed you a diet of pizza and sleepovers so you would always

know Jesus could be found in soft furnishings and comfort food. Yet now you actually open the Bible for yourself and discover the awful truth: Jesus is about slavery, death and the cross. Jesus is about humiliation, fear, agony and shame. This isn't the Christianity that made this country great. This isn't the Christianity that binds families together and gives people hope in times of suffering. This is an outrage! This is glorified masochism. No one's ever going to want to go anywhere near this religion if word gets out about this. You spend your whole life building people up and strengthening their self-esteem and making them feel better about themselves and then along comes Paul and says, "Be a slave. Be prepared to die. Face up to an agonizing and shameful death. Deal with it." This is an outrage. No young people should ever be exposed to it. It's against everything our culture stands for.

Hmmm. Go back to those different meanings of the word outrageous. Maybe this is the moment when Paul's description of Christ and our call to have the same mind as Christ crosses over from being a source of fury and rejection to a cause of intrigue and fascination. Maybe we just shifted from saying "This is an outrage," to saying, "You know, you're rather outrageous."

Because look at what Paul's saying. He's saying, "Here's what infantilizes you, here's what makes you squabble with one another, here's what makes you easy meat for any who might want to keep you down or tread on you or dominate you. For a start, you're obsessed with your own freedom. You're so keen to be yourself and express yourself and not take orders from anybody, that you can be easily manipulated by the fantasy of choice.

Just imagine what it would be like to be truly free. Free from comparing yourself to others. Free from resentment. Free from greed, from envy, from relentless insecurity and comparison. Fancy the taste of that? Okay: face the fact that you're a slave. Now, stop trying and hopelessly failing to be free, and let go of the fallacy that you can ever fully express yourself. Feel the paradoxical power you've suddenly been given. You're no longer in the grip of your own quest for autonomy and you're free to relate to people without always having to win. That's pretty exciting. That's pretty intoxicating. That's rather outrageous.

"And then look, what's next – you're dominated by your search for survival. Think how much time you spend trying to pretend you're never going to die. Consider how you live your life as if the ship's sinking and you're going to flex your elbows and knock a fair few people down to ensure you're going to make it onto one of the very few lifeboats. Isn't that how a lot of people think about getting into their first choice

college or their number one graduate school? ‘Phew, I’ve made it onto the lifeboat. I guess it’s tough for everyone else. They’ll have the icebergs for company.’ But the truth is, none of us survive, however many degrees we get or trips to the gym we make or botox treatments we have. The grave claims us all in the end.

Just imagine what it would be like to be free of the fear of our own mortality. No longer dreading every birthday. No longer eradicating each gray hair. No longer torn up by the anxious anticipation of oblivion or nothingness or worse. No longer scratching each other’s eyes out thinking, ‘The fewer there are of these guys around, the more oxygen there is for me.’ Fancy that? Okay: face up to your own death. Let go of the fantasy that you can get out of this alive. Enjoy each moment without the depressing shadow that life is a diminishing resource. Wouldn’t that be wonderful? Wouldn’t that be gorgeous? Wouldn’t that be rather outrageous?

“And there’s a third dimension to this. You spend your whole life avoiding pain and shame. Your every shopping trip is devoted to a life lived in comfort, and you more or less have a personal physician on hand to make sure you never feel a moment’s physical unease. You keep the poor and needy far away lest their predicament become infectious and you encounter real, razor-sharp pain. And your biggest fear is that you’ll be exposed as a sham, that somehow someone will discover your lies, your pretension, your shabby dealings, and you’ll be seen as a fool, a failure, and a fraud.

Just imagine what it would be like to be free of these twin fears of pain and shame. No one can now destroy you, because you’ve faced up to all the things that your torturer could possibly dangle in front of you. They can attack you, but you’re no longer at the mercy of physical pain. They can ridicule you, but you’re no longer trying to maintain the pretense that you’re perfect and put-together. Feel the wonder of that. It’s like you’re flying. You’re not weighed down by reputation or cowardice. You feel almost divine. Isn’t it exhilarating? Isn’t it delirious? Isn’t it rather outrageous?

This is the journey Jesus made, Paul tells us. Jesus faced slavery, the cost of complete obedience. Jesus faced death, the complete loss of control. Jesus faced the cross, the epitome of agony and shame. And look what happened to him. He was called Lord. But he was already Lord, because he’d overcome slavery and death and pain and shame and all the powers that oppress us. He was exalted by heaven above and the people on earth and who knows what below – but he already had that, because someone who’s faced oppression, mortality, agony and derision is a stranger to no one and already keeps the company of angels. “Is that the company you want to

keep?” asks Paul. Now that’s some ambition. Well, now you’ve seen how to go about it.

But wait a minute. What happens when you put these two outrages side-by-side with one another? What happens when you put Crowell, Few, and Sanford’s outrageous ambition alongside Paul and Jesus’ outrageous humility? What the church has often said is, well, we have to set the humility piece to one side for a while. The world is full of ambition and conceit and unscrupulous deals and Christians have to be as wise as serpents and not just as innocent as doves. Of course we should be humble in the conventional way, by not drawing attention to ourselves or helping ourselves to the larger, richer slices of tea-cake. But if we truly adopt the mind of Christ we’re going to end up subjugated, trodden on, embarrassed and irrelevant.

I trust you recognize this conventional view. But I trust you can also wince at its irony. It more or less accepts as given all the things the mind of Christ enables us to overcome. In an attempt to imitate a worldly ambition it ends up exhibiting an unworthy humility. It’s missed its real opportunity. Because don’t you see – this is the moment to be truly outrageous.

I’m going to tell you what it means to be truly outrageous. It means to say to our founders and forebears, we applaud your ambition. There was no cozy club that could look at upstart Duke and exclude the young rookie with the words, “Restricted.” There was no cultural flaw in the South that could hold back this fireball of energy and endeavor from bursting into a place of its own in the firmament of the American academy. John Crowell, James Duke, William Few and Terry Sanford, you were the architects of our destiny. We’re living your dream. We really are.

But wait. You weren’t ambitious enough. You weren’t outrageous enough. Listen to these words with fear and trembling, and work out what they mean for your and our salvation. We have something even more outrageous to tell you about. Paul calls it humility. Paul calls it the mind of Christ. Make my joy complete, says Paul. Face your own slavery, and so become free like no one has ever been free before. Face your own death, and so live like no one has ever lived before. Face the ultimate in pain and shame, and so dismantle fear like no one has ever done before.

Now that’s what I call ambition. Curiously, that’s what Paul calls humility. But either way, if you set your sights on that goal, I’ll tell you one thing for certain: every tongue in heaven will sing and every knee on earth bend, and all will say, with wonder and delight, “You’re outrageous.”