

This sermon is based on research presented in Dr. Chuck Campbell's Inaugural address, *The Preacher as Ridiculous Person: Naked Street Preaching and Homiletical Foolishness*, delivered at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Dr. Campbell is Professor of Homiletics at Columbia.

Naked Street Preaching: The Naked Truth

Isaiah 20:1-6

1 Corinthians 4:10

Religion, Christianity, the Church, has a way of drawing, attracting its share of crazies, wackos, weirdoes, doesn't it?-----The Church is like a magnet to the bizarre and the way out, the almost off the chart personalities. Or put another way, there's more than a few Christians who are like Duke students at Cameron Indoor Stadium. (I had to get that one in.) Maybe craziest of all, looniest of all, nuttiest of all is the shouting, irritating, Bible-waving street preacher.

If you have witnessed the madness of a street preacher raise your hand.

God help us!

One of my big disappointments in life has been going to Bourbon Street in New Orleans and not getting to see or hear the street preachers. I have no idea where they were but they weren't there on that day. Maybe they had to give their tonsils a break. Who knows? But street preachers shouting "God hates sinners" and ranting and raving about hellfire and damnation are as much a part of the Bourbon Street carnival as are half dressed humans swinging out of windows of Bourbon Street businesses. Sin and salvation side by side and red beans and rice with Andouille sausage for lunch. Now that's a recipe.

By the way, when I didn't get to see the Bourbon Street street preachers it was the summer of 1976 I was a high school senior with a group of 25 youth and two adult chaperones on the way back to North Carolina, having been to hot as hell Texas to lead a week long youth revival. That is, we got revived and then went to Bourbon Street. Go figure. I guess trying to save Texans will be enough to cover the sin of going to Bourbon Street.

Anyway, despite my Bourbon Street preaching disappointment the next year I got all the street preaching I cared to have. That would be next year as a Freshman at what Jesse Helms called the "Sodom of the South", that would be the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

They say at UNC you get as much of an education outside the classroom as you do in it. (Please no commentary from the peanut gallery.) And one of the places we got the outside education was at a centrally located area on the campus next to the student union and bookstore, a place affectionally called The Pit. Invariably, day in and day out, even on weekends, in The Pit there would be street preachers, some dressed in coat and tie waving a Bible as they shouted salvation and/or there would be some other guy with a long beard dressed in rags doing an imitation of

Jesus who looked like he either just walked off the pages of the New Testament or just walked out of the psychiatric unit at the hospital.

A few years ago walking to the football stadium I was "pleased" to discover that UNC street preaching had expanded out from The Pit. A few hundred yards from Kenan Stadium was a street preacher standing beside a ten foot high board on which he had listed the 10 commandments. As I walked past the street preacher I found myself praying for the health of the guy's vocal cords. Poor fellah evidently used all his money on the 10 foot sign and didn't have any money left for a 25 watts, 1000 yard range megaphone. Street preaching does have its occupational hazards.

Street preachers aren't going to win any popularity contests, are they? And we don't really like them either, do we?

Liberal Baptists are not noted for liking preaching period, at all. Throw in an extreme form of preaching like street preaching and you've got a major aversion on your hands.

And yet,-----and yet, you may be surprised to find out that street preaching has actually been valued by some during the Church's long history, and that would be true even for the most extreme form of street preaching, naked street preaching. Birthday suit preaching. Bare it all for Jesus preaching. Religious strippers. I'm not joking, and I'm not speaking metaphorically. Some traditions, particularly the Orthodox tradition, especially Russian Orthodoxy, have actually valued naked street preaching. In these traditions naked street preachers are not simply odd, historical curiosities. They are not considered religious crazies. No, and this is surprising, naked street preachers have actually become venerated saints of the church. Imagine, nakedness and sainthood.

I'll give you two examples. First example. The famous St. Basil's Cathedral on Red Square in Moscow—you know the one I'm talking about—the cathedral with the glorious onion domes and fanciful colors. You've seen it in photographs. And in case you haven't, look at the front of the bulletin. That's St. Basil's Cathedral. It's beautiful, isn't it! But guess who it is named after.-- -----That's right, St. Basil, the naked street preacher. For over seventy years in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Basil wandered the streets of Moscow year round—often stark naked—enacting, proclaiming, and embodying the gospel for the people of the city. One of his miracles, someone has noted, was simply surviving so many Russian winters. In his birthday suit in freezing temperatures Basil called sinners to conversion and engaged in other strange sign-acts, such as throwing rocks at the homes of those who made a public display of their almsgiving and kneeling to kiss the pavement before houses of ill-repute. And write this down. On August 2, 1588, this naked street preacher was officially made a saint in the Russian Orthodox Church.

Another famous naked street preacher is a saint we have a statute of in our meditation garden. Leave it to Wedgewood to put a naked street preacher in its meditation garden. And for the record, just so you know the guilty party, it was the First Lady of Wedgewood who bought the statute and ordered her spousal unit to carry that heavy, weighty, bulky cement statute that hurt his back tremendously even to this day---it was the First Lady of Wedgewood who supervised the transport of the Naked Street Preacher to the garden. Do you know what saint I'm talking

about?-----That's right, none other than the famous St. Francis of Assisi engaged in naked street preaching. At a critical turning point in his ministry, Francis stripped naked before the Bishop in the public square of Assisi, proclaiming his freedom from his father and his freedom for God. Standing stark naked in the square, in front of God and everybody, he cried out: "Listen, listen, everyone. From now on I can say with complete freedom, 'Our Father who art in heaven. Pietro Bernardone is no longer my father, and I am giving him back not only his money, . . . but all my clothes as well.... I shall go naked to meet the Lord'" (Green, 82-83). It was one of the most provocative acts of testimony in his ministry because Francis' father was very rich. In this situation, Francis' nakedness was a provocative act speaking against the wealth and materialism of his father and of that society and culture.

St. Basil and St. Francis are two of the more famous naked street preachers. But there's also Vasilii of Moscow. There is Andrei of Constantinople, who received instructions in a dream, "Be naked and mad for my sake". There is also Symeon the Fool of sixth-century Syria, possibly the most bizarre of them all, and being a pinto bean lover myself, he is my favorite. Symeon, and I'm not making this up. It's too good to have been made up. Symeon the naked street preacher was given to eating enormous quantities of beans, which, of course, produced the desired effect.

Are you learning anything?

Naked Symeon also walked into a city in Syria dragging behind him the carcass of a dead dog that he had gotten from a dung heap outside the town. The next day he went to worship and tried to extinguish the candles in the church by throwing nuts at them.

I hope this isn't giving any of you any ideas. Like you need any encouragement.

Women, you'll also be happy to know if you are lesbian or a heterosexual male, also got into the act of naked street preaching. A number of women, such as St. Mary of Egypt, embraced nakedness as a form of devotion, though they tended to be ascetics in the desert, rather than public figures in the cities.

That's a lot more naked street preachers than you were aware of, I bet. And we haven't even gotten to the Bible yet. Ah, naked street preachers in the Bible.

As I often say, "don't blame me; it's in the Bible. Don't blame me if you have overlooked parts of this Bible. Don't blame me if you engage in big talk about the Bible when you haven't read all of it."

The great patron saint of naked street preaching in the Bible is the prophet Isaiah as we heard from Isaiah, Chapter 20 at the beginning of this worship service. According to the Bible, God told Isaiah to take off his clothes. And Isaiah did exactly that. He engaged in a ministry of naked street preaching for three years as a way of dramatically exposing the foolishness of relying on military and political alliances—particularly alliances with Egypt—in the face of the Assyrian Empire. More broadly, however, Isaiah was exposing the consequences of a world ruled by the domination and violence of a superpower.

It's not difficult to guess what Isaiah would think of our country, our world's superpower. I wonder how long the prophet Isaiah would preach naked in the United States.

Why would God tell a preacher to preach naked, if God did, in fact, do that? Why-----why would St. Basil and St. Francis and Isaiah disrobe?

A Christian author named Flannery O'Connor when O'Conner was asked why she wrote such strange stories with such grotesque characters replied, "When you're writing for those who are "almost-blind, you draw large and startling figures."

Maybe that's why God would tell Isaiah to put on his birthday suit. Because we are blind.

Stanley Hauerwas at Duke Divinity School says that when you are in the corn patch you have to shout to get people to come out on the back porch.

Maybe that is why God would tell Isaiah to bare it all because we are hard of hearing.

Naked street preachers. "Sacred jesters," as Chuck Campbell, professor of Homiletics at Columbia Seminary, calls them. Holy fools engaged in an intentional, carefully orchestrated kind of street theater, shouting out in the corn patch to get us on the back porch. They offer up a kind of daily "carnival" that unmask the social hierarchies and decorum of the day and turn the wisdom and power of the world on its head. They lampoon and burlesque social structures and systems shaped by the power of sin and death in order to unmask human sin and to help set people free from the powers. Maybe God told Isaiah to get naked as a way of making us see our own nakedness.

St. Basil tried to get the emperor to see his nakedness. St. Basil tried to show the emperor that he had no clothes. He spoke truth to Tsar Ivan the Terrible. On one occasion during Lent, Basil presented the Tsar with a huge slab of beef. When Ivan replied that he didn't eat meat during Lent, Basil responded, "Why abstain from meat when you murder so many [people]".

I believe we are in a situation today of world leaders and world powers being unable to learn the hard lessons. I believe our current context is one of blindness and deafness. People and nations aren't looking and seeing past their own mirrors. I believe that's especially true, sadly, not only for the halls of government but also for steeples throughout the land. I believe Christians are need to learn hard lessons about the Bible and about sexual orientation and about the poor and about AIDS. And I believe God is calling you and me and this church to provoke a new kind of looking, a new way of seeing, a new way of hearing.

Now don't get worried. I haven't yet heard any call to naked street preaching. And I hope you haven't either. If I get a call from the jailhouse from you after this sermon wanting me to come bail you out because you've been arrested for naked street preaching don't count on me to get your naked fanny out.

Paul tells the Corinthians they are to be "fools for the sake of Christ" (1 Corinthians 4:10). And I'm telling you that also, but I agree with a former President of Princeton Seminary. When

seminary students put Bible verses in helium-filled balloons and released them on campus to be carried up and away and down into the hands of the unsaved the seminary president noted that yes the Apostle Paul said something about being fools for Christ's sake but he didn't say anything about being damm fools.

So keep your britches on. Don't take off your shirts. But do this. Batten down the hatches. Put your feet on some firm ground. Get over thinking everybody is going to celebrate your birthday. The ministry of this church is unsettling. The ministry of this church is shocking. The ministry of this church is disturbing, but the ministry of this church is so necessary. God is calling us to speak the naked truth to the world and to the steeples.

You see, we don't just minister to those who have been beaten up by the traditional church. We also have to minister to the abusers. And it's difficult. It's hard. It's enough to make you lose your religion. And I lose my patience.

Hear me. Some people will never change, not on this earth, anyway. Some individuals, some Christians will never see their blindness, their nakedness. They will never see the beauty of Christians like us. We can't get bogged down with such people.

But there are others we can help. Their minds are in cement. But you know something about cement. Cement always cracks. Always. I don't care how good the cement mix or how well the cement is poured or treated. Cement always----always cracks. And with these cracks there is an opportunity-----an opportunity for world views and false myths to die and to be replaced with the love and compassion and understanding and knowledge God wants us to have. Into these cracks the naked truth can enter.

I know about cement. I know because in the past my mind was like cement. But it did crack. And in a mighty way.

Have you ever seen a mighty tree's roots break up cement? Look at the inside of your bulletin at the photo. Look at what those tree roots did to that cement. That's what the naked truth did to me. And that's what you and I are called to do. We are to be like that tree and bust up cement minds.

Today I invite you to be a part of the ministry of this congregation. I encourage you to be like a tree breaking up cement. Unlike St. Basil, you will not get a beautiful church named after you. And unlike St. Francis, they will not make statutes of you and put in church and home gardens. But you engage in breaking up the cement and the world will be a better place because of you and your witness and your life.

But in closing, let me repeat, and I hate I have to repeat things to this crowd. Don't call me at 1 a.m. in the morning to get your naked fanny out of jail.

Or put another way, God help us to be like those naked street preachers, just not exactly like them.