

Sermon for March 4, 2018 (Lent3B) “Altarcations”  
(Based on 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and John 2:13-22)

I heard a sermon by Reverend Billy this week. There's no denying he's a powerful preacher, with a following that numbers in the thousands. When Reverend Billy gets up in front of a crowd—in the park, in the street, in a bank lobby or a mall, there's no ignoring his zeal and passion for The Cause. Now, that may all be true about the evangelical elder they buried this week, but I'm not talking about Billy Graham. I'm talking about Rev. Billy Talen, the fiery leader of the Church of Stop Shopping.

Here's how his congregation describes themselves: “We are wild anti-consumerist gospel shouters and Earth loving urban activists who have worked with communities on four continents defending community, life and imagination.” You'll hear plenty of Jesus in Reverend Billy's sermons. He talks about the Holy Spirit and imagines it moving through the land like a swarm of honeybees. His favourite names for God are “Love” and “The Fabulous Unknown” For fifteen years, they've been trying to spread the gospel of caring for Community and Creation. They've been calling us to fight the devil of consumerism, the devil of racism, and other death-dealing forces. Here's an excerpt from their “about us” statement on Rev. Billy's website:

We employ multiple strategies, including cash register exorcisms, retail interventions, and cell phone operas. Outdoors, we have performed in Redwood forests, between cars in traffic jams at the entrance to the Holland Tunnel, on the Staten Island Ferry, at Burning Man and Times Square and Coney Island, and on the roof of Carnegie Hall in a snowstorm...

Our inspiration is the opening scene of Night of the Iguana, where the fulminating preacher drives his congregation out of the church and into the rain. At this time of the Earth's crisis, we must turn our institutions inside out and start over!

It sounds pretty ridiculous. And it is. They don't dabble in paper birds like some pastors I could mention. They show up with a 50-voice choir dressed as golden treefrogs from the Amazon rainforest. Reverend Billy's gospel isn't straight out of

Nazareth. It takes the widest, weirdest detour possible towards the temple in Jerusalem. And even if—especially if—this doesn't sound like your kind of thing, hear me out. Because the disturbance they create, and the new gospel songs they sing, and the art they invite communities to help them make, is done exactly in the spirit of Jesus.

It's the same spirit that led to the unique American invention known as the “Weekend.” Do you know how we got weekends? The combination of Saturdays and Sundays off was the result of faithful action by Jews and Christians over 100 years ago in the American labor movement. Back then, employers expected workers to put in six, even seven days a week. In 1890, the first year official records were kept, the average workweek in manufacturing and construction was 100 hours. By 1908, workers were consistently granted Sundays off, but Jews couldn't count on keeping their Sabbath on Saturdays without losing shifts, wages, or their jobs. And so Jews and Christians worked together to push for limits that would give them all a day of holy rest. And that year, a New England mill became the first employer to grant a five-day workweek to all its employees.

It's the same spirit that led hundreds of schoolchildren in Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963, to school themselves in the ways of nonviolent resistance and present their young lives in witness to the cause of equality and human liberation. Children as young as 8 and 9 years old volunteered to join demonstrations in what came to be called the “Birmingham Childrens' Crusade.” They knowingly faced attack dogs, water cannons, beatings and imprisonment. And when they were rounded up, bruised and bleeding, and herded into overcrowded cells in that city, they filled the cells and the corridors with gospel songs...because they understood the power of this kind of holy foolishness. And the word of their witness was published and broadcast around the world, and helped to bend the moral arc of the universe.

And now the spirit moves among other children, the children we dismiss as ignorant and emotionally immature. Children like Samantha Smith, who dared to write to the leader of the Soviet Union and ask him if he wanted war or peace. Children like

Malala Yousefzai, whose campaign for girls education could not even be silenced by the bullets of the Taliban. Children like Emma Gonzalez and David Hogg, whose cries of Never Again have spread from Parkland Florida to Oklahoma, Oregon, Alaska, Indiana, and Maine.

The religious want miracles. The philosophers want debates, research, and reasons. But we preach Christ, and the Gospel is foolishness. There's room in this for Billy Graham and the other Reverend Billy. There's room for Jews and Pagans who see a place for themselves in the shared work of liberation. There's room for faithful elders and hotheaded young men who turn the tables, screaming in anguish in the middle of the temple. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

*--Preached by Rev. Holly Morrison, pastor  
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