

Service  
Sunday, December 16, 2007  
Third Unitarian Church of Chicago

### **Opening Words**

“Brothers and sisters,” he’d say, “don’t let your souls burn in the hell of endless buying! The Shopocalypse is right at hand! You can stop it by ‘backing away from the product!’” Changealujah! Reverend Billy, the “Impresario of Shocking Evolution and Holy Hilariousness” is coming to a mall near you, and he’s with us in spirit today to cleanse our souls by restoring our credit card balances! Come, O Savior come!

### **Reading and Meditation**

You might think that I was planning to just jump on the Reverend Billy Talen’s bandwagon this morning. That I was going to recite uncritically his anti-materialist message of the “Church of Stop Shopping Now!” If you thought I would shamelessly preach that message to you, the choir who long to have their anti-corporate ideas confirmed, you’re right! And you are also wrong! How often are human feelings *ever* that simple? It’s true that you and I don’t like, and resist, being manipulated to want things, having our desires subtly enflamed to want that car, or those shoes.

But it also happens that there are things we value, though not being consumerist. A former parishioner of mine in Wisconsin had a lovely dining room cabinet made of cherry wood. It contained pieces of china she’d collected from the women in her family, most long since departed. Among its treasures was one such plate, with a small grey chip in its edge. Its blue veins etched into the creamy background an outline of a mountain in Scotland where her people were from. The date on the back said 1761. Her great-great grandmother, married at 16, had this as a wedding gift.

It was one of the few things she took with her as she sailed across the North Atlantic to New York a month after her wedding day.

What that woman up in Wisconsin had done to protect those heirlooms, some valued only because of the memory of people who lovingly scraped turnip from its surface. And why not? Some of them, like the blue plate, were beautiful and worth admiring on their own. They were expensive once, I'd bet, and now are only more so. Like a great painting, you feel uplifted just having seen it. How bad for one's soul is it to have a few pieces of that beauty?

This is "The Tow Truck Driver's Story," a poem by Elizabeth Garber. She writes.

You meet all kinds of people in this work.  
You have to be polite, twenty-four hours  
a day. It was a brutal winter night,  
I'd worked since four a.m., finally coming in  
to sleep when the phone rang, a guy calling  
from up on Appleton ridge, saying  
he needs a jump. I asked, "Can't it wait?  
There's still snow on the roads, the plows aren't  
All through. It'll take me three hours at least  
to get there with the roads like this." "Ok,"  
he said, "I'll wait." I went to bed an hour,  
before he called, "It's an emergency."  
The storm had eased as I headed out,  
But the wind had been so bad, I had  
To stop and climb over the drifts to knock  
the snow off signs to see where to go,

a hard dark climb up to Appleton Ridge.  
Over three hours to get to a lonely  
country farmhouse, light glowing brightly.  
Then a man in, I kid you not, a red  
Satin smoking jacket comes out and waves.  
I think he's waving to me, and wave back,  
But it's a garage opener and out of the dark  
A door rises, lit like a museum,  
A car, glittering white and chrome beauty,  
It was a 1954 Mercedes.  
A Gull-Wing. You ever heard of them?  
I think they only made ten of them.  
Its doors lift up like a gull in flight.  
I bet it was worth a million dollars.  
I ask, "Are you going to take that out?"  
"Oh, no, we just got back from Jamaica  
I want a jump to make sure it's ok."  
It starts like a dream, purrs dangerously.  
"Oh good," he says and walks away, waving  
his arm to close the door, never saying  
a word, left me standing there in the snow.

We're guilty by attraction, both the humble and the high. Please join me for  
a moment of silent meditation and reflection.

### **Offering Thoughts**

If it's snowing and icing over it in Chicago, it must be a Sunday morning in 2007! That's what the winter's been like so far. It's like God is putting roadblocks on the way to church, testing the faithful, penitent believers. Well, it's not going to stop us here, either! If you're a newcomer, please feel free to introduce yourself as you would like, and tell us how you heard of us.

Gustave Flaubert once said, "It's easy to chatter about the beautiful." He also said, "To be stupid, selfish, and have good health are three requirements for happiness, though if stupidity is lacking, all is lost." A severe view, indeed. Perhaps this was his idea of denial. Nevertheless, we're always thinking of ways to convert our resources, like the receipts of this morning's collection, in ways that will do some good in Austin and the world. Reverend Billy would approve.

### **Hymn**

### **Reading**

In this excerpt of the book that is a companion to the movie, "What Would Jesus Buy," Billy Talen describes his way of raising consciousness about the power of 'big-box' retailers. He writes,

"The first job of a church is to save souls. And pulling out of the advertising/debt/waste cycle of Consumerism is our idea of deliverance. Much of our soul-saving mission work consists of dramatic rituals and plays inside retail environments. Our missionaries are sometimes disguised as consumers—"invisible" to management's eye.

At other times our Nonviolent Disobedient Performances inside the retail environment, the chaos and broad strokes—the Inappropriate Behavior! Amen!—carries our message best. The interventions that follow, developed over the last ten years, are some of our favorites.

As your new church prepares to Stop the Shopping of the citizenry, as you become a Sacred Spy of the Shopocalypse, it is worth asking yourself a few questions.

Who's your Devil? Whether it's a big box or chain store, or a nuke plant on a fault line: This is your "charged stage." The consumers are the souls that must be saved. (But never forget: WE ARE ALL SINNERS.) When the consumers come into view, browsing or walking up the street, they will see your church performing inside, or oddly near, the Devil's logo. We must be naïve about how powerful the multinationals are in the ordinary matter of BUY THIS. The consumers, upon seeing the imagery of the product or corporation, often immediately have memories, fantasies, anticipations. This is Product Sex, and it is sinning of a very well-defended kind. It is our job to know what the existing props (the logo, celebrity spokesperson, corporate history, recent news items) are doing to the openness of those witnesses. What are they thinking? Could they be open to asking a new question or two about the product before them?"

**Sermon:**

“The Great Crusade of the Reverend Billy”

It’s a well-worn story: the street musician who played for spare change at the top of the subway steps is overheard by someone with influence. She becomes a pop music star, a diva millionaire, a fashion trend-setter. The stand-up comic, playing for a few laughs at seedy bars, gets noticed. There’s a TV appearance, a movie role, and then he turns into Stephen Colbert.

That’s right, the man who believes he is America, and so can you, says, “here’s a phrase we live by in America: “In God We Trust”. It’s right there where Jesus would want it: on our money.” He has identified a religious litmus test that helps you tell the difference between the conservatives and liberals in one sentence: “mentioning,” he says, “Jesus in your speech: [that’s] small government. Doing what Jesus asked: [that’s] big government.”

If you’re a non-believer, don’t be so quick to laugh, for Colbert also says “atheism is the religion devoted to the worship of one’s own sense of superiority.”

Touché! If we laugh at other faiths, *I* should be able to laugh at all of *your* shortcomings. All right, I’ll include myself, because our beloved Director of Music will *never* let me off the hook.

‘The Reverend Billy’ is the stage name of Mr. Talen. He is a native of Minnesota, of Dutch Calvinist heritage. So he knows whereof he speaks when he uses the language of the evangelical church.

He came to New York from San Francisco in the late 1990’s. He developed a reputation with a character—a hybrid of street preacher and televangelist—out on the in alternative theaters on the West Coast.

He migrated to New York to try his act in Times Square, and he was intentional in selecting this neighborhood.

Why Times Square? When Talen moved there in the '90's—this was “Giuliani time” in New York--the neighborhood was changing: changing from a seedy strip of drugs and prostitution, to a gentrified one of condos and big retailers. In years past, street preachers lashing sin and loving the sinner really were part of Times Square. So in his new ministry—and he is very clear that he isn't merely *playing* minister, he believes he *is* one—part of his ingenuity is that he built a new persona on the platform of an old neighborhood model. For the same reason, I suspect the name ‘Reverend Billy,’ with its overtures to the most famous preacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was chosen with intent.

Times Square was losing its authenticity, its spirit. Not everyone there was safe, but more often than not, the inhabitants weren't dangerous. Talen saw that more often than not, the lost souls living on the streets, and the storekeepers that catered to them, would look out for you.

The appearance of the Disney Store on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street started to change that. As tourists came to the neighborhood, Bill Talen preached on the evils of consumerism. He started on his own, and then, in a way not unlike the fisherman from Galilee, he attracted converts.

Their typical ruse was to walk into a Disney store and mill around. After a few minutes, they'd start talking on the phone, getting louder and louder, complaining about Mickey and his wares. Once his cover was blown, Talen would start in on the shoppers until the police hauled him away, still preaching away as they threw him in a paddy wagon.

Today, his favorite targets beyond Disney are Wal-Mart and, more recently, Starbucks. He performs exorcisms at their cash registers for their union-busting and their non-Fair Trade coffee. Think he doesn't have influence? Starbucks went so far as to file an injunction to keep him beyond 750 feet of their stores in California. Managers in New York, and now nationwide, have a document entitled, "What to do if Revered Billy is in My Store?"

Now, before you say this crazy styling has no footing in the mainline church--or any church, for that matter--know that the man who turned Bill Talen into an anti-consumer revivalist was an Episcopal priest named Sidney Lanier. He's a cousin of the playwright Tennessee Williams. Lanier was the vicar at a church in Hell's Kitchen that doubled as a theater space. Bill Talen was his stage manager.

The priest told Reverend Billy to study radical theology. He did, and now he mixes the feminism of Elaine Pagels with the satire of Lenny Bruce. Perhaps this is why he said his religious goal is to put the "odd back in God."

Emma Goldman once said, "Love is the strongest and deepest element of all life...the defier of all conventions." "Now," the Reverend Billy says, "Saint Emma tells us that Love overrules Laws. This is his motivating concept. He goes on, "I would like to add that gay marriage is the power and the glory and is the key to reversing global climate change brought on by trapped greenhouse gasses. Furthermore, lesbian marriage is the life everlasting and will save the Spotted Owl."

And in this blend of humor and affirmation, he embodies an alternative culture--just like Emma Goldman did. You can say this is the old “free love, people over profits” message, done by the “Merry Pranksters” -- except that in a time far as far removed from the ‘60’s as Pat Paulsen is from Mitt Romney, the mainstream is starting to pick up on *what* he’s saying, just as much as *how* he’s saying it.

*This is activism in a creative, fun way. And who else is doing anything as creative and fun, without big money but still on a wide scale, these days?*

With his street theater, his book and his movie, which may or may not come to a mega-theater near you, he is today’s premier example of “culture jamming”: which by definition is “transforming mass media to produce commentary about itself.”

He might not stop “affluenza,” SUV fever, and credit card spending enough to put families in debt for generations. But as I said, the mainstream media, finally, *is* paying attention.

In San Jose, Boston, or London, the press follows him, despite what’s happening to the movie. He led an event in Iceland this summer to protest what’s happening to the environment there.

But here’s an example of how business controls the messages we get: on Christmas Day two years ago, he and his 34-person choir, with eight musicians, got arrested on Main Street U.S.A. at Disneyland for signing anti-shopping songs. This is a key scene in his movie, which premiered this June. And this message of anti-consumerism has delayed its spread, since the director himself said that major distributors have backed away because Wal-Mart pushes so many of their DVD’s.

Nevertheless, in a scene that Talen and his wife Savitri Durkee call the heart of the movie, three teenage girls from the Upper East Side wonder about where their clothes come from. They check the labels on their shirts. "A little kid probably made that," one says to another. They do research online and read about workers in Bangladesh being forced to work overtime and getting burns from hot glue machines.

We are going to shop one way or another. We'll catch ourselves at the mall when we don't want to be. But as Ms. Durkee says, "I just hope [people] will think about what they buy and try and support local economies. Utopian ideas are really important, but if I can get 100 people to shop less, that's great."

He's a heretic, but did you know that Web sites in the evangelical youth Christian movement are calling him a hero—because of the movie's message to connect with family and friends.

So, before you have the urge to sing "Fill the Malls with Wealthy People" to the tune of "Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly," let us now bow our heads just as Billy Talen does:

LET US PRAY—I knew that would get your attention!

Give us the bravery to dismantle Santa, Mickey, and the daily retail grosses. May the gift at Christmas not be the end of Life. Lend us the insight to see how cockeyed and backwards things have gotten. The resources are here—we are the upright, big-brained animal. God gave us the smarts. How did giving become taking? How did the celebration of Life become murder?

Amen.

And now, the congregation will hear "The Beatitudes of Buylessness:"

Blessed are the Consumers, for you shall be free from Living by Products.

Blessed are you who stumble out of branded Main Streets, for you shall find lovers not downloaded and oceans not rising.

Blessed is the ordinary citizen who holds onto a patch of public Commons, for you are the New World.

Blessed are you who confuse “Consumerism” with “Freedom,” for you shall be delighted to discover the difference.

Blessed are city neighborhoods that people have flown from in fear, for your children shall return to illuminate the dark economy.

Blessed are the workers in the super malls, for the town your employers killed shall come back to Life!

Blessed is the breadwinner with outsourced dreams who sits in the SUV stuck in a Christmas from Hell, for this year a gift will set you free.

Blessed are you who are pinned under the gaze of the four supermodels of the Shopocalypse, for you shall transcend the media and dance in the streets.

Blessed are the young women in sweatshops, for the things you make will fly you like magic evening gowns to the City of Light.

Blessed are you who disturb the customers, for in doing so, you are loving them. Amen!

### **Closing Words**

From Bill Talen and his monks at the Slow Down Your Consumption School of Divinity: they say, step away from the product, America. Start living, and loving what you live, and where you live it.