# The symbolic power of a consumption sabbath

Aiden Enns

Ideas and symbols are powerful. A community of resistance has at its disposal, with every act of consumption, the opportunity to change the world, incarnate love, and bring about justice.

In Winnipeg one day in 2012, some Christians wearing blue choir robes entered a great and mighty shopping centre, and there, unbidden by management, they sang songs. At first the employees stood amazed that something so fresh could happen in their aisles. But then some began to grumble because the singing was disrupting the process of commercial extraction, and a senior manager shouted at the singers and asked them to leave. The young choristers were amused at the disturbance they had created; it was life giving to them. They had transgressed the covenant between the lords of the economy and the citizens of the land. They had enacted a fleeting but real sabbath from consumption. They made a video recording of their actions and shared it to inspire others.

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## Jesus as Sabbath innovator

The Gospel writers tell of a time when Jesus and his disciples were walking in the fields on the Sabbath and became hungry. In violation of religious law, they picked and ate grain from the leftovers. Their action caught the attention of the authorities, who got upset. On another occasion, Jesus met a man with a shriveled hand. Again, it was the Sabbath and they were in a synagogue, under surveillance by the authorities who were watching to see whether Jesus would work on the day of rest. In full view, he transgressed the social and religious code of his day and said, "Which is lawful on the sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to

save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:1–5, NRSV). The Pharisees started to plot against him with intent to destroy him.

Why were the authorities so perturbed? Was it because Jesus and his friends stole mouthfuls of food from leftover crops? No, it is because their actions were intentional and symbolic violations of social codes that kept the leaders in control. In the name of bringing life to those suffering under systems of injustice, Jesus resisted those in power by contesting their symbols of control—in this case, their Sabbath regulations.

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The functioning of our social and political system requires a society-wide consensus. When even marginal people outside the offices of power contravene this consensus with symbolic acts of transgression, they invite response from the full and lethal force of the state apparatus. For example, in December 2014, an employee at a Chipotle in New York City held up his hands when nine police officers entered the fast-food restaurant to order food. It was a symbol of solidarity, a "hands up, don't shoot" gesture popular with people protesting the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a few months earlier. The employee was disciplined, and two chief officers of the company apologized to the police (according to an Associated Press story). One month later also in New York City, the preacher-actor-activist Reverend Billy Talen was at a demonstration in Grand Central Station. "I shouted 'Black Lives Matter' a few times in Grand Central Station and police rushed at me like I was a fiend." He was arrested, held in prison, and later released.

"Those wanting to keep a social system unquestioned and unchanged find the religious imagination 'dangerous,' " writes Michael Warren.[1] This is how I choose to read the story of Jesus: He was publicly executed to show what would happen to anyone who disrupts the smooth economic and social exploitation of the people. Into a community of finite evil and oppression he disclosed the possibility of a prevailing and infinite good. I see him as a whistle blower, a culture jammer, a truth-telling social agitator. He wept as he looked on the city.

In my Christian imagination, he still weeps for cities today. In our city we have people who live without a home, who go through the day in search of a free meal, who live with intellectual disabilities and receive inadequate mercy. Moreover we have churches full of rich and powerful people who do nothing to change the laws and practices to care more for those in need and enact policies of hospitality, wealth redistribution, and moderation. To be sure, we have legions of nonprofit organizations that seek to alleviate the suffering of others. But just as medics don't stop wars, our social services don't challenge and correct the systems that create suffering and displacement. I exaggerate, but the point is: we know we participate and benefit from injustice but don't do enough to acknowledge and stop it. Why is this? Part of the answer lies in symbolic gestures that destabilize the social consensus. For example, to the dismay of his followers, Jesus let a penitent woman soak his feet with expensive perfume. That symbolic gesture subordinated oppressive utilitarian values and elevated costly, boundary-breaking love for the outcast.

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I have been disaffected by an apolitical, other-worldly, salvation-for-self, evangelical gospel, but I stay in the church because I want to join with others in following a Jesus who moved among the poor and disenfranchised. And when he encountered those in power responsible for oppression, his nonviolent direct action exposed brutality and injustice, and gave hope to those in despair and opportunities to support liberation.

### Outdoor revival meeting brings Earth Day to church

Our group of activist-oriented Christian consumers in southern Manitoba wondered what radical, yet relatively safe, action we could do to both celebrate Earth Day and disrupt the church's complacency in the face of environmental degradation. We had held a foot-washing service on the street in front of the government tax offices. We had held a service of lament, worship, and prayer at an oil pipeline station in southern Manitoba, a site at which Canadian oil is pumped into the United States.

We came up with the idea of a consumption sabbath, an outdoor worship service in a park in front of the provincial legislature where we as Christians and environmentally conscious citizens pledged to take a rest from consumption, with an aim of restoring a right relationship with the earth and its inhabitants. We sought to offer a range of opportunities for engagement. Some people were interested in civil disobedience, and others wanted to show support through legal avenues of free speech and right to assembly. The event started with a procession a mile from the park, with placards and an idol. Our "golden calf" was an empty oil barrel, spray-painted gold, which we hoisted onto the shoulders of four participants. It was a not-so-subtle symbol for how our lives revolve around energy consumption, how our collective economy relies on it, and how nations go to war in part to defend their access to oil.

We marched on the street without a parade permit. But because it was Sunday and we only took one lane, the mini-spectacle was more a curiosity than a disruption. I wasn't in the procession, because I was sitting at home at my computer. I was the designated preacher for the worship service at the end of the parade, and I was fretting about the final wording of my sermon. I live across from the park which was a meeting area for those who wanted to march a shorter distance. Outside the window of my study I could see the group at the second staging area.

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A couple of Mennonite churches in the area closed their doors that morning and encouraged members to bring lawn chairs and picnic blankets to the tent for the revival service. Everyone was encouraged to practice a sabbath from oil consumption as they travelled to the meeting. Some walked, many rode their bikes (and parked in a supervised area), and others took the bus or shared vehicles.

I printed out my sermon and hopped on my bike to catch up with the procession. In the spirit of the revival meetings popular among evangelical Mennonites in the mid-1900s, I wore a button-

up white shirt, black pants, a "Mennonite beard," and for flair, a bow tie. As I arrived a large crowd had already assembled. Under the red and white circus tent 100 chairs were already full or spoken for; on the grass another 200 people spread their blankets or set up chairs. The piano player was adjusting the legs on his digital piano stand and checking the wires. The guitar player, also a sound technician, was strumming a few chords.

The effort contributed to make the event happen was significant; there were tent-renters, chair haulers, musicians, conductors, choristers, ushers, bike valets, media relations people, church administrators, announcement placers, and a videographer who made a "trailer" for the event. My modest task was to read my remarks with hints of humour and compelling enthusiasm.

In advance of the event, members of the choir rode the transit bus in their robes and sang songs praising consumer restraint. In addition to singing in stores at the mall, they walked downtown sidewalks snapping their fingers to a refrain alternating between solo voice and choral echo: "O happy day / *O happy day* / O Lord, you wash / *O Lord, you wash* / my carbon sins away."

The service included three speakers who brought "testimonies"—following the evangelical tradition of personal and moving accounts of spiritual struggles and triumphs. A young man, DeLayne Toews, with leather-bound Bible in hand, declared he had been saved from his consumptive lifestyle by working and weeding in the garden. Annie Janzen, an older woman, exhibited a pot of soil with the bulb of a flower that keeps producing year after year. Christine Penner Polle, a woman in midlife, confessed that she used to avoid the topic of climate change, but when she embraced her new identity as a "fossil fuel abolitionist," she discovered a new sense of hope.

To conclude the service, ushers handed out pledge cards and pencils in preparation for an "altar call," an invitation for people to come forward and publicly demonstrate their commitment. Preacher: "What is on your heart today? Will you make a pledge? On the card you'll see a few suggestions to get you thinking: a digital sabbath, a junk-food sabbath, a motorized transport sabbath. Some of you are poised to take a big step. I trust that for some of you, today will be a turning point in your life. You say 'yes' to the spirit of life."

We knew from studies in social change that if people make a pledge and write it down, they are more likely to take action. We knew from worship planners that especially those people who are kinesthetic learners are likely have a more powerful experience if they can respond to a call in a tactile and symbolic way. People came forward and taped their pledges to the oil barrel.

After the service, the pledges were collected and shared with organizers. A postdoctoral researcher, Joanne M. Moyer, analyzed the 129 pledges; of them, fifty-one provided contact information for follow-up.[2] Pledges included: "Drive less, bike more." "Plant an apple tree." "Not enter the doors of Wal-Mart for the next year." "Take a junk food sabbath." "Leave the car parked at least two days a week." "Buy secondhand clothing for a year." "Cut up my credit card (once paid off)." "Three meatless days per week." "Talk to people in power." "Develop canning/preserving skills."[3]

## Sabbath reappropriated

Participants in the service were doing two things at once: they were holding a church service and "playing church." They took the revival seriously even though they knew it was part parody. Organizers and participants were innovating with the boundary between church and world, between gospel and social action.

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A number of people asked me after the service whether we were joking or serious. Researcher Moyer sent a questionnaire to people who left their contact information on the pledge cards. "By taking a somewhat satirical tone in presenting the tent revival form, the planners also risked confusing or offending those who felt connected to this style of worship," she wrote in her report. For example, Participant 102 had difficulty interpreting the event: "The worship service was confusing . . . Was it meant to be worship? Or was it poking fun at a form of worship that some have found meaningful?"

The evocation of cognitive dissonance was intentional, part of the strategy for social change. We wanted to convene a large

group of people with the lure of spectacle and the promise of something worthwhile. We sought to redeem entertainment from the for-profit sector and use it to provoke new patterns of thought and behaviour. We suggested that the biblical notion of Sabbath could inform social and economic practices of a consumer capitalist society. Jesus often confounded his listeners. Some of his parables are so ambiguous you could call them riddles or zen koans. He used common images in innovative ways to crack open new meanings for a people encrusted by the mechanisms of oppression. Actions are guided by thought patterns. Thought patterns can be disrupted, expanded, and redirected through the use of metaphor and symbol. Freeing the notion of sabbath from its biblical and religious tethers allowed new and persuasive imperatives to address overconsumption and greed in a society normally immune to messages of restraint. In my mind, that was the theoretical and theological goal behind our promotion of a consumption sabbath.

## Notes

[1] Michael Warren, *Seeing through the Media: A Religious View of Communication and Cultural Analysis* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1997), 192.
[2] Joanne M. Moyer, "The Consumption Sabbath: Considering a Faith-Based Initiative to Inspire Simplicity and Environmental Action" (paper presented at Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre Scholar's Forum, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, January 28, 2014).
[3] See Consumption Sabbath - Revival Recap (8:02 minutes), uploaded to YouTube April 25, 2012.

## About the author

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