

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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Sixty Cocoanut Row, Palm Beach, Florida 33480

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“WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BILLY MAHER?”

TEXT: “I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first...”

Revelations 2:4

The sermon I have for you today was first preached, by me, over 40 years ago on May 24, 1963. It seems unbelievable to me in a dozen ways and more, that it should surface again after all these years. (1) One, I marvel that I knew enough at the time to catch the drift of things which lie behind and prompted this sermon. I was 27 years old at the time. (2) It is a wonder that I would remember it in exquisite detail as I move to the last few weeks before my retirement: forty years is a long, long time. (3) Third, I recall that my mother at the time praised me for the sermon. She was always favorable to her children. But she caught what I was trying to say and elaborated on it point by point. Then she said “Save that one Richard, and preach it again when you retire; then you might know what it means.” My mother has been gone for 20 years but I guess I never forgot what she said. (4) Fourth, long before I published my first book, (I was still a cub-rookie assistant pastor in 1963) this little sermon persuaded me that preaching could be worthwhile.

It was well received. It was originally broadcast on a national radio hook-up, by a quirk of someone else's illness, and it received more requests for copies than all but one other sermon I have ever preached. (You will be pleased to hear that I do not intend to preach the other one again.) (5) Fifth, every once in a while a few old friends I meet from time to time all over the place, still ask me “Whatever happened to Billy Maher?”

It's time you found out. Willy nilly – here is your sermon:

I must confess here at the start that I have no answer for the question posed in our sermon topic this morning. I don't know what happened to Billy Maher. I don't even know him, or anything about him. Only as a name, only as a boy that Mike Berger wrote about a few years ago in the New York Times; a little boy with a piece of chalk who took it to himself one day to inscribe his profession of love on the wall of a New York City Public Library, for there inside a chalk heart in big chalk lettering, was this delightful scrawl: “Billy Maher Loves Everybody.”

I don't know him... but for what may seem obvious reasons, I like to think of him as a little red-head, with all of the energy and enthusiasm that God has made for little boys alone, (I was once a red head), a Huck Finn of mid-century, “with none of the virtues except the essential ones, and all of the vices, except the unforgivable ones,” a likable little scamp with a sparkle in his eye, a smile painted on his face, and this marvelous message in his heart: “Billy Maher Loves Everybody.”

Perhaps I'll be unfair to Billy in this sermon. It could be that he became one of those grand souls who never gave up on that perfect profession of love most of us make in our youth, before we see the world as it really is. Perhaps I am being unfair ---- but my guess is that Billy has changed.

“Billy Maher Loves Everybody.” Somewhere along the way we will knock that out of him, won't we? How long before he takes another view – before he sees an ugly crowd in action, and will not recognize the ugliness? Martin Luther King once wrote “I was allowed to play with any child in the neighborhood, until I turned 6.”

Where he used to love, Billy will start to laugh. Somewhere along the way, he will learn that you love only those who love you, who go to the same church, the same club, the same school. We will teach him how to hate, and he will learn his lesson well. Where his vision was once the world, it will stop at the end of his block. For Billy wants his privacy now. He used to run the streets with open arms and open heart, now he sits inside and draws his circle of friends closer and closer, until there is room for just a certain few, then none.

In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus told of the man from Samaria who stopped to help a man in need. What about it Bill? Are you stopping these days to lend a hand?

Billy used to be honest and happy. He used to have wide and wonderful dreams of what he could do with the whole world open before him, to challenge him at his depths, to draw out his best at every turn of the road. Billy used to have unclouded vision of what the world is supposed to be. Billy knew how to dream.

But look at Billy again. What happened? What happens to most all of the Billies of the world? They get lost, sidetracked from their main road. They lose their love of movement; they rest. They arrive in style, but they forget where they are, or worse, where they are supposed to be. They want to get ahead, but they get left behind. Call him Thomas Wolfe for the moment, who laments for a whole generation: “All my hopes and dreams and big ambitions have come to nothing. It all got lost. How is it that nothing turns out the way we thought it would?” How is it?

For look at Billy ten, twenty, thirty years later, what time and well-meaning people have done to him. He used to love everybody, now he can't, because his parents won't allow him, or his schoolmates or clubmates won't permit it. Billy used to love his neighbor. Now he doesn't even bow his name, like the lonely hearse that backed up to an apartment building, and no one, even on the same hall, knew where the family lived, or died.

Billy will pick up sides before long. He'll get careless. He'll watch the rain wash away his chalk marks and do nothing to protect them. He will stand at the foot of a giant bridge and yell to some poor suffering soul, “Jump!” Or he'll turn out the light of some frightened neighbor who needs only a phone call to the local police. He used to love everybody, now he doesn't want to get involved. He used to respect everybody, now if he is honest, he does not respect himself.

Somewhere along the way they will tell you Billy: “Don't forgive anybody! Don't let them walk on you! Court the favor of the mighty. Love those who can make you a success! Smile at the cocktail parties Billy, indulge in idle chatter! Every time they say something you know is wrong, pretend it is right! Don't use love as the absolute, Billy, make it relative enough to serve you, don't end up serving it! Hold your head up high Billy! Don't stoop to help, don't bow down Billy, they will laugh at you!”

Remember that little snippet about Abraham Lincoln: He got down from his horse one day to lift up a pig stuck in the ditch. (He actually did.) He got all dirty Billy, and they laughed at him.

And, remember that longer story, where God came down from His heaven to lift up a world deep in its own weakness. He got soiled too, Billy. Whoever in the world stoops down to help

weakness? ... And they laughed at Him, because He did not care for their grown-up games. They labeled Him and laughed. They poked fun at Him with nails and spears. They got rough with Him Billy. They excluded Him because He refused to pretend. They killed Him, Billy, because He had mastered life where they had failed.

So if you keep that message in your heart, and act upon it, they will get rough with you, too. Billy. They will call you names. They will blackball you, and ostracize you, outside the city walls with all the rest. It's awful sometimes and lonely out there... But that is good company to choose, that's great company to be in, for you will be with the ones that God loves most of all.

Think of it. How many times have you been where we have placed Billy? What happened to him is what happens to everybody, save the few who tower over the rest of us. For Billy is you! Billy is me! What happens to all of us between then and now, between words and actions, between our prayers and plans, our past and present? "We shape our dwellings," wrote Churchill, "and afterward our dwellings shape us." We decide what we want most from life, then life gives it back to us in full measure, just as we ask. Ask Robert Browning, T.S. Eliot, ask Flannery O'Conner, ask Charles Dickens or Marcel Proust, even ask Wagner or Nietzsche. Even better ask the Lord Jesus Christ.

Remember way back then when you were just a child, all that filled your hands when you were free from every tie. Think back then, before your fist became frozen around the little things you treasure now; before we learned to hanker after everything you don't want or need anyway. When what mattered most was that you could live without worry and without fear. You knew how to smile then, and how to live. Before Wolfe was your favorite novelist or Wagner your favorite composer, when you thought liberal meant a big portion of cake, when the Bible was

God's Word, sixty-six books, and you knew them all by heart.

What happened? Somewhere between there and here, between then and now. For now and here you don't have it anymore. You used to have the whole wide world before you, now you have your hands circled around a wee little plot that you define and describe, and eventually destroy. The basket was full of dreams but you forgot to take it along. Tagore says in disarming simplicity, "You have forgotten the art of being absorbed in sticks and mud pies."

Think back then, when your only claim to a happy life was the built-in ability to live one. To go each day as if it were your last or first, or somewhere in between. You could sleep at night then, without drinks or pills or games or gimmicks. You didn't worry much. Oh, perhaps a few minutes worth because the cops would get you for lifting a watermelon at the Lawrenceville railroad years, or the "pudds" you put on the evening fire came from a neighbor's lumber pile, or you swiped some grapes from Mr. Becker's arbor (oh did he get angry) ... And then when the week was over, or was it a month, or a year, or years, you let that get away...

It is a dull sight to watch a human being poisoning himself with hate, shutting out so much of life that could be his, drawing a circle around his own small world. Then one day Markham reminds you:

He drew a circle that shut me out.

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle that took him in.

Or Frost embarrasses you by reminding that those fences you keep putting up keep falling down, and you have to guard and repair them constantly, "For something there is that doesn't like a wall."

Or best of all, look at it in the light of this second chapter of the book of Revelation. The angel writes to the Church: "I know your works and your toil" – a compliment. "I know how you cannot bear those who call themselves prophets and are not" – a compliment. Your theology is good. Your thought is Christian. "I know you have not grown weary, you patiently endure." – a compliment.

But none of the compliments can erase the criticism in verse four, The angel says, "I know your works: but I have this against you, you have abandoned the love you had at first." You lost it. It is gone. You have built a great life. Glory to the God who guided you. But I have this against you, you lost your first love, the first enthusiasm you once had for your church, your faith, your marriage, your family, your friends, yourself...

God says: "I like the way you look and talk. I like the way you work and worship. I like the way you guard my truth. But what about this – What happened to the love you had at first? What about it Billy? Did you give up on that? There where you make your chalk marks on the wall now. Is it true? What's inside that big heart that encircles everything you are and do? Like the little girl prayed: "Dear God, make the bad people good, but please make the good people nice."

That malady of the middle-aged: you have abandoned the love you had at first. How many times we hear it: "We have this beautiful home," he said, "these wonderful children, the respect of our friends, all that we could want, but we aren't happy anymore. We have lost our love for each other." From a worried woman, from a little boy who wonders why his Dad doesn't come home anymore, from a teen-ager sent away to school, or from a lawyer in the court – alienation of affection they call it. What a sham! What a misrepresentation of the evidence! You don't lose love Billy, you throw it away. You allow the

debris of the years to cover it over. You get careless, or you systematically set out to destroy it. You put other priorities before it. That's what happened to you Billy, you threw it all away. And now you come whimpering to me.

No, you don't lose love. It lingers around at the door like an unwanted guest. It waits for you when you sit down to rest at the end of the day. It whispers to you when all else is silent. It winds it's way around you and sits in the front row of your memories, there in the pupil of your eye to remind you – you don't lose love. It holds on when everything else lets go. Until you beat and batter it and run away from it. Then one day it disappears. Love suffers long.

And you see it becomes infinitely more important when we stand off and view it from this one last angle. Billy used to love everybody, and he used to love God. He had a personal attachment to the Lord Jesus Christ. His concept was limited back then of course; he thought of God in restricted terms. We have said it 10,000 times 10,000 times, "You are wrong Billy. God is no great congenial companion up in the sky. God is beyond everything you call God. Your terminology is archaic. Your spatial references need to be rethought." We taught Billy that we have outgrown that kind of myth. Billy had never wrestled with the argument that God is not up there or out there or in there. He had never read Honest To God, or thought much about the various theories.

I asked a little boy in a Sunday School class once what he thought about when he thought about God. He looked at me incredulously and answered immediately, "God – just God, that's all." While the rest of us set about to entertain Him with our fanciful expressions of faith, and throw the garlands of our favorite theories at His feet, Billy had a faith that meant something.

But somebody will talk him out of that someday. Before long he will tell you everything which other people have said about God, but he cannot remember anything which has inner meaning to him. That's what will happen to Billy. He will gain a whole world of information, but he will lose the only thing which matters. He will change, but he will pay the price. And the cost is great. For with George McDonald he will understand the horror deep down within himself: the one principle of hell is this: "I am on my own."

Nothing can separate us from the love of God, cried Paul. Not principalities, not powers, not life, not death, nor any other creature. Nothing, i.e. except ourselves. We can make Paul wrong. We can cause the separation, by willful act or by neglect. "Yes, I have this against you" said the angel, "You have abandoned the love you had at first." "Except you become as little children." Jesus is speaking now, "you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Billy Maher loved everybody... but Billy is gone now. Off to chalk another heart on some other wall. I wonder where he went and what he wrote next. I wonder what he's writing now, whether he knows how much he lost, how little he has gained.

This sermon is for you Billy, wherever you are. Whatever age you are, you can start over again, wherever you have been, whatever you have done. You can draw that heart again and write the inscription inside. Hidden deep within your soul, it is still there. And you can find it Bill. For the river alone runs swift with a song... but the mountain stays and remembers and follows her with its love. The mountain is still there Bill, eroded some perhaps, hidden under brush and overgrown with weeds, but the mountain is still there, still waiting, still calling. "I wonder if Billy will come."

I wonder, for you see I don't know what happened to Billy Maher. I don't even know him or anything about him. Only as a name, only as a little boy with a piece of chalk who took it to himself one day to inscribe his profession of love on the wall of a New York City Public Library. For there inside a chalk heart in big chalk lettering was this delightful scrawl: "Billy Maher Loves Everybody." For now and forevermore. Amen.

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