

SERMON SERIES: THE WALKING DEAD 3
LUKE 7:11-17
MARCH 13, 2016

A little over 40 years ago, one of the greatest theological works of the 20th century was given to the people. This work asked big questions about God and faith and mission. This work taught us to question what we thought we knew about God and the universe. This work, of course, is the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Okay, maybe this isn't the most orthodox or reverent work of theology, but amidst the folly and ridiculousness of this movie, there are some bold statements about humanity making sense of divinity. One of the most iconic scenes takes place at the bridge of death. For your pleasure and as a reminder, here it is:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cV0tCphFMr8>

As silly and ridiculous as this scene is, it should be required viewing for every Christian because it tackles one of the biggest questions that beleaguers us all; who gets passage over the bridge of death. If we accept as truth that some people spend an eternity with God and that some people do not spend an eternity with God, in whatever form that takes, the big question for all of us is, who gets to cross the bridge? Jesus says things like, I go to prepare a place for you, and no one comes to the father except through me. This is a not so subtle snapshot that the gospel is exclusive by its very nature. Some get it, some don't. So, the question comes back to this simple idea, who gets to cross the bridge of death?

I love this video from *Monty Python* for a few reasons. It really encapsulates this conundrum. First of all, when it comes to the bridge keeper, the knights cannot fully agree whether there are five questions or three. How many right answers are required to cross the bridge. I love how it vacillates between extremely easy questions and extremely narrow questions that few people can answer. The prevailing image is that God has a bridge and Peter or maybe Paul sit at the gates. Asking something like this, will it be three questions? Five questions? Will it be a supremely easy question, "Why should I let you into God's

heaven?" "Because I believed in Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior and I prayed the prayer of salvation." We might be prone to wonder if it should be that easy. A prayer. A simple proclamation, not much harder than asking, "What is your favorite color?" Conversely, we might think it is a bit harder, some equivalent question about the speed of swallows or the capitol of some obscure country, some theological question or request for proof. We think, I don't know if it should be that hard.

Who gets to cross the bridge? What questions must be answered? Who is in and who is out? These questions are bad for your soul. We are in our third week of our Walking Dead series, and we are examining the state of our souls leading up to Easter. Your soul is not the ghostly version of yourself; it is your whole self. It's all that you are before God, your mind, body, will, emotions and actions. It's your whole self. When part of who you are is incongruent with whom God has called you to be, your soul is damaged. It dis-integrates. We are using this metaphor, The Walking Dead, for two reasons, 1) we are aware of the fact that even as new creations in Jesus, we can quickly become zombie-like. Our souls can disintegrate and we look just like the world around us. We can claim to be followers of Christ but look nothing like him. 2) We are studying stories of resurrection leading up to Easter. We think we can learn what it really means to be alive when we study stories of death.

So, each week, we are looking at what it means to have healthy souls. We are looking at some things that beset us and drag us down; mindsets and ideologies that sap our joy and derail our souls. In week one, we looked at our obsession with winning and losing. Last week, we looked at God's priorities. This week, we look at the bridge of death. Who is in and who is out? How do we prove who really knows Jesus and who doesn't?

We need not feel bad for asking this question because John the Baptist asked the same question.

Luke 7: 18-23

When John heard about this, he had to ask the question, “Are you the one? Matthew highlights this whole discourse by calling Jesus, “the Christ,” in this passage. John then asks, if Jesus is the “One.” This is a not so subtle allusion to the Messiah. Are you the “One” that was promised through countless prophets? Are you the “One” who is the fulfillment of all of the covenants? Are you the “One” who would be the conquering king who would liberate his people?

Why would John ask this? It is easy to forget, but John is Jesus’ cousin and is older than him by only a few months, so he grew up with this kid. He knew the story that was told around the family meals every year. Joseph would gather everyone around and tell the story of how Mary had an angel come to her and tell her she was having God’s child. Then how they traveled to Bethlehem. How wise men came and how the shepherds came. How Joseph was told by an angel to get out of town and go to Egypt...on and on. Then he probably heard all of the stories and experiences of them growing up. The stories we never heard. Then how Jesus stayed behind in the temple in Jerusalem for three days as a 12 year old. Now as an adult in Luke 3 John says, “One who is coming after me who brings judgment and authority. He will castigate the Pharisees and bring in a new level of devotion.”

On top of all of this, Jesus came to John the Baptist and was baptized by him. Do you remember what happened then? The skies parted and a voice rang out from heaven, “This is my son in whom I am well pleased.” How can John ask such a question? He grew up with this man, he heard and saw the stories unfold, he baptized him and saw God’s touch of approval, and now he is seeing and hearing about the Sermon on the Mount and all of these healings. How can he ask, “Are you the One?”

Because John’s human experience is not matching up to his divine expectations. John is imprisoned at the moment in the prison fortress, Machaerus. Herod the Great, the guy who was king when Jesus was born, the same Herod who put to death all of the little boys under

age two when Jesus was born, built this fortress and has given it to his son Herod Antipas. Who, I can tell you is just as conniving and evil as his father. This fortress is on top of a hill overlooking the region and the Dead Sea. It is Herod's personal palace and he also has a place to imprison his enemies right on the premises. Why? I think John was being daily mocked and punished in the presence of Herod and his family. Here's a little background for you, John constantly called out Herod Antipas because he had divorced his wife and taken his brother's wife to be his wife. John was calling Herod a sinner and humiliating him in his loud voice to whoever would notice. So Herod took him prisoner, but he didn't cast him into the town prison, rather the one right in the middle of his fortress. Why? So they could keep a close eye on him, mock him and punish him. How do I know this? I don't definitively, but I can guess from the way John ends up dying.

The story is told in the gospels that Herod's stepdaughter dances for him at a party one night and he is so pleased with it, he offers her anything she wants up to half the kingdom. This girl runs to her mother, the same mother that John was calling an adulterer and a committer of incest, and says, "Mother what shall I ask for?" She asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. This wasn't a whim but the culmination of revenge against the peasant man who had besmirched her name. This leads me to think they had John nearby to mock and punish him. They just didn't get around to killing him until much later.

So here we find John, locked up in Herod's fortress. Seemingly defeated, he will end up dead because of a petulant teenager's silly request. What a terrible way for the great John the Baptist to go out. So, from his prison cell, John sends a message, "Are you the one?" His personal experience isn't lining up with his divine expectation. John was surely expecting Jesus to expel evil men like Herod. John was expecting to see the Romans vanquished. John was expecting the Pharisees to be put in their place. John was probably expecting to preach alongside Jesus and see the kingdom being ushered in.

Instead, Herod is still on the throne. The Romans are still in charge. The Pharisees are still in their place, and John is rotting in prison and ultimately going to be put to death, he sees the writing on the wall, his time is short. This surely was a storm in John's life. Not only

personally as he is in his enemy's jail cell, but his whole expectation of the Messiah's work isn't what he thought, and so he asks, "Are you the one?"

Here is what directly precedes this question. Jesus has just spent some time doing several things in chapters 5 and 6. He heals a leper. He heals a paralytic. He preaches the beatitudes. He heals a man with a withered hand. Then two important things happen in chapter 7. 1) First, he heals a centurion's son. Even though this man is well liked in this story, he still represents everything a 1st century Jew would dislike. He is an unclean pagan. He is a centurion in the Roman Legion. That means, he is an unclean pagan and he is a Roman soldier who helps oversee a foreign occupation of God's promised land. Jesus shows grace to this man and heals his son. Then, we read this:

Luke 7:11-17

Jesus heals a widow's son, as a simple reminder that a woman in this culture was tethered to the men in her life. As a young girl, she was protected and cared for by her father. When she got married, she was protected and cared for by her husband. If her husband died, her only hope was to have a son that could work and manager her affairs. This woman had a son, but he had died. She had nobody and her future was not bright. Jesus heals this woman's son, he restores her hope and he tangibly blesses her.

As a summary, this woman seems to be well liked, as there is a big crowd for the funeral. This means, she is probably religiously faithful and well thought of in the community. She is an orthodox Jewish widow. The Old Testament time and again paints widows as those closest to God's heart.

Jesus shows grace to the unclean pagan foreign occupier, and then he shows grace to a well-liked, religiously observant woman who is close to God's heart. Do you see the width of this spectrum?

After healing people with varying problems, then caring for someone way over here and then someone way over there, John the Baptist asks the question, “Are you the guy?” Implicitly implying that this isn’t what I thought the guy would be doing.

I think Jesus answers this question without really answering it. Did you notice that? John asks Jesus point blank, “Are you the one?” Jesus doesn’t say yes or no, he says, “Tell John what I have been doing. Tell him the blind receive sight. The lepers are cleansed. The lame walk. The deaf hear. The good news is proclaimed to the poor.” But he doesn’t answer the question.

I am sure many of you remember the play or the movie version of *Fiddler on the Roof*. At one point, Tevye turns to Golde and asks, “Do you love me?” Tevye and Golde have been married for years. They are husband and wife who have shared a home together. They have raised kids and built a life together, but this is also set before our era and understanding of marriage. It takes place at the turn of the 20th century and Tevye and Golde were in an arranged marriage, and so Tevye asks, “Do you love me?” What is amazing is that Golde sings a whole song without answering the question. She says, “I have fed you, kept your house, raised your kids.”

John says, “Are you the one? Is this the real thing we have been waiting for?” Instead of a direct answer, Jesus says look at what has been done and he quotes from various passages in Isaiah. If you remember from Luke 4, Jesus stands up and reads Isaiah 61, the year of liberation and jubilee. He says this has been fulfilled in your presence and he is returning to that today. He says, “Look around at all of the life. Tell John about all of the life that is sprouting up. The life that is being repaired. The life that is being restored.”

Here is what is interesting; Jesus doesn’t mention people praying the prayer. Jesus doesn’t mention people being baptized. Jesus doesn’t mention church attendance. He says, “Look at all of this life.” He answers the question, but he doesn’t answer the question. Jesus is oddly vague, until you realize it isn’t that odd for him to be vague. In fact, he is often vague and mysterious. How many times were the disciples left scratching their heads about the

stories Jesus told? It was the way he did things, preferring stories above propositional truths. Preferring actions over words. Preferring a call to love above a theological system. Choosing to subvert our expectations so that he can capture our hearts.

Jesus knows something full well in this episode today. That which you want to sterilize, you systematize. That which you want to crush, you codify. Jesus kept his answer vague to keep the story vibrant. Jesus knew that if you made the Christ story about agreement to certain tenets or mental ascent given to a set of principles, that it would be lifeless. If you distilled down this Jesus movement to three questions you will need to answer one day at the bridge of death, you will turn it into a sterile religion. John has heard the stories, but it doesn't quite fit the picture of what he expected. Jesus has a simple message; the work of God is always bigger than your expectations. It is wider. It is deeper. It cannot be captured with a theological statement. He essentially says, look for life and if you find it, then I am there.

Most of the dissension within the Christian world happens around theological disputes usually regarding secondary issues. In many places, the Christian faith has been systematized and codified, and subsequently it has been sterilized and crushed. Jesus said, "Follow me," and the western church has said, "Let's talk about following him." Jesus said, "Make disciples of me," which means teach people to say what I said and do what I did. Make them look like me. It is no surprise then for Jesus to respond to John not with a yes or no, but rather a series of snapshots of life thriving.

The take away for us is simple. We aren't the gatekeepers. We don't guard the bridge. Whether it is five questions or three questions it is not our job to guard the gate. Not only is it not our job, trying to do that job will make us miserable. The problem is once you become the goblin at the gate, or the troll at the bridge, you miss the opportunity for life. Your number one goal, when you find the bridge is help as many people cross as possible, anything else will wreck your soul. Being the goblin at the gate or the troll on the bridge will make you angry. It will keep you up at night.

Jesus doesn't stoop to this line of thinking. He could have taken John down the Emmaus Road. He could have opened up the scriptures and answered John's every question, but he knew that wasn't what John needed. The guys on the Emmaus Road knew almost nothing, but John knew it all, he had the Torah memorized and Jesus changes it up. He makes it about life. He makes it something that can't quite be measured or quantified or proved.

At SFC, we want to be a church where life thrives. That means we want to be full of stories of lives being restored, lives being given, lives being celebrated. Of course we need to appreciate sound theology and correct biblical doctrine, but we also want to be a church that promotes life.

One of my favorite questions to receive from a visitor is, "Is this a Bible believing church?" Now, what do people mean when they say that? What they mean is that they have a very narrow theological issue that they cling to dearly, and they want to know if you support their position. When people ask me that question, I would love to answer not with a yes or a no, rather I would love to say, we have built 110 houses in Tijuana Mexico for those who could not afford it. We have built wells in Central America for those who had no clean water. We cared for HIV positive orphans in Romania. We fed the homeless downtown. We cared for single mothers.

When you say something like that, the real question is this, who really is a Bible-believing church? One that knows doctrine or one who lives it? One who follows Jesus or talks about the nuances of how it's done? Who gets to cross the bridge?

In 1968, the Golden Gate Bridge became the first major bridge in the world to offer one-way toll collection. Most of you know this; you don't pay when you leave the city, you pay when you come into the city. This wasn't done to keep people out of San Francisco. It was done to minimize staffing, to improve traffic flow and to reduce noise and air pollution. It's counterintuitive but if you double the price coming in and make it free going out, it makes everything a lot easier. Jesus paid the price twice over for you and me. As his creations he owned us, but he paid the price again by dying on the cross. He paid the price coming in, so

that it would be free on the way out. God help us if we change that design. For those who acknowledge that Jesus paid the price, we should never stand in their way. The price has been paid, the lanes have been cleared. Grace has been offered. Let's help as many people as possible cross to the other side.