

QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

SERIES: BRIDGES & BARRIERS



Catalog No. 20190317
John 6:22–69
Second Message
Paul Taylor
March 17, 2019

John 6:22–69

We're going to start this morning with a little poll. How many of you have ridden a bicycle in the past three years? Okay, so it looks like most of us are able to ride a bike.

Now we move from the practical to the intellectual. How many of you think you know how a bicycle works? Specifically, why doesn't a bicycle simply tip over?

For those of you who think you know how a bicycle works, you might be surprised to learn that a group of leading mechanical engineers have recently concluded that they don't. They published an article in a science journal disproving the ways people used to think bicycles worked. There were a few leading theories, the most common of which is called angular momentum. That's the idea that the rotational momentum of the pedals keeps the bike balanced.

The engineers proved that angular momentum wasn't necessary to keep a bike from tipping. They disproved the other leading theory as well. In their place, they came up with a few other factors, but overall, this is their conclusion stated by Andy Ruina of Cornell University: "The complex interactions have not been worked out. My suspicion is that we will never come to grips with them, but I don't know that for sure."¹

Does that disturb you at all? All these years of people riding bicycles and nobody really understands how they work? Why doesn't the bike tip over? Maybe we'll never fully know the answer to that question.

Our church took a survey several weeks ago that asked what some of the barriers were for you in talking about your faith in Jesus. Over half of you said that one of the biggest barriers was that you were "not confident in answers to difficult questions." Today is the second week of our series called *Bridges and Barriers* where we are trying to address those issues.

How do we talk about something when there are a lot of really difficult questions that we don't have good answers for?

I think this is an easy barrier to overcome. To get past this barrier, you don't need more education. You don't need to collect a lot of answers. All you have to do is to understand questions without answers.

We are oriented toward answers in our culture. In school, we are graded on how well we answer questions. In math class, you show all your work, and then you write your answer and put a nice little box around it. We think that people are motivated by answers. We spend our lives trying to find answers to difficult problems about health and science and the universe.

We think that people won't be happy until they have answers. But in our over-emphasis on answers, we have missed the powerful beauty of questions. We're afraid of questions, so we want to squelch them by finding answers. But maybe the answers aren't as important as we think. Maybe the questions themselves are significant.

There was an interesting article in *The New Yorker* a few weeks ago entitled "A Different Kind of Theory of Everything." The author discussed the attempt by physicists to find a theory that explains everything. The conclusion was that such a theory might not exist. And in a strange twist, they suggested that we have the answers, we just don't know the right questions. The article ends with this statement: "It's as though physics has been turned inside out. It now appears that the answers already surround us. It's the question we don't know."²

We're going to look at a conversation between Jesus and two different groups of people. First, he talks with a crowd, and then he interacts with his disciples.

We're going to pay attention to how Jesus responds to people's questions. We'll see that he doesn't really answer most of them. He seems to have a different goal. He is completely focused on one thing: faith. And apparently, he seems to think that faith doesn't depend on answers.

My prayer is that this passage would encourage our own faith, because we all have unanswered questions, and also that it would equip us to respond well to the questions of people around us.

The crowd searches for Jesus

This interaction begins after Jesus feeds 5000 people who have gathered to listen to him preach. Somehow he manages to take five small barley loaves from a young boy and feed everyone. The leftovers even fill up twelve baskets.

When Jesus leaves the crowd, the disciples get in a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee to return to Jesus' home base of Capernaum. Jesus stays behind to pray by himself. Later, he catches up to them by walking on water across the stormy sea.

Those two big events form the background for the interaction we're going to look at in John 6.

John 6:22-24:

On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. 23 Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. 24 So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

Can you picture this crowd? After eating a lot of bread, they probably fell asleep on the seashore. They had seen the disciples get in the boat by themselves, so they didn't know where Jesus went. Eventually, people found some more boats and went to Capernaum to find Jesus.

These people had questions. They had big questions about Jesus. In fact, their questions were so pressing that they tracked Jesus down to find out what was going on. Where did the bread come from? How was there so much left over? Where did Jesus go? What was he talking about? How did he manage to heal people?

Their questions drove them to Jesus. They searched for him.

Our problem is that no one around us seems to have any questions about Jesus. We'd love to meet people like this—people who want to find out more. It seems like most people don't really care.

What always surprises me about Jesus is that he never tries to get people to be interested in him. He doesn't promote himself. He had no social media strategy. He didn't give away mugs that said "World's Best Messiah" on them. He didn't trick people into coming out to see him preach on the hillside.

These people searched for Jesus because they had real questions.

Here's what I believe: everyone has questions about God. You have questions about God. I have questions about God. My children have questions about God. The wealthiest people in the world have questions about God. The most oppressed people in the worst of situations have questions about God.

Having questions about God is an important opportunity for connection. It's not as if non-Christians have questions about God, and the Christians have all the answers. We all have questions about God. All of those questions are in various states of being answered. There are some questions where I'm quite confident of the answers. There are others where I'm uncertain. And there are some where I simply don't know.

If we all have questions, then we don't have to be scared of them. If we think that questions demand answers, then we run from them. But when we start to get comfortable with our questions, then we can leave space for them.

Maybe it seems like no one around us has questions because we're too scared to let them ask. Or maybe we think we know all the questions they have, so we never really stop and listen. We tend to assume which questions people have. But maybe they are different than what we think.

Have you ever been in a meeting where the leader explains something and then asks, "Does anyone have any questions?" but keeps talking and talking and talking? The invitation is out there, but there's no space to ask a question.

Most people won't ask a question if there isn't space for it. Space requires silence. Be willing to stop talking and let people ask questions. I've rarely heard the complaint that Christians are too good at listening. Why don't we stop talking and make space for people's questions?

Don't assume you know their questions. Don't interrupt them. Don't answer questions they aren't asking. Don't change the subject because you are uncomfortable with the question. Leave space. When Jesus did this, people asked him really hard questions. Let's see how he responded.

The crowd questions Jesus

The first conversation takes place over 35 verses, so we're not going to read them all. Our purpose here is not to completely understand what Jesus is trying to say. It's a powerful passage, and I'd refer you to two different sermons entitled "The Bread of Life" on our website (pbc.org) if you're interested in going deeper into Jesus' message.

For our purposes, we want to see the kind of questions the crowd asks and how Jesus responds to them. Over the course of this conversation, they ask five different questions. Here they are:

John 6:25b:

"Rabbi, when did you come here?"

They want to know how Jesus got to Capernaum without a boat. It's a simple question. He doesn't address that question at all; instead, he encourages them to "work for the food that endures to eternal life" (v 27). This gives rise to their second question.

John 6:28:

"What must we do, to be doing the works of God?"

This is the rare question in that Jesus directly answers. We'll look at his answer in more detail in a bit. But in general, he tells them to believe. So the crowd asks for a sign that can confirm their belief.

John 6:30:

"Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?"

Remember that he had just fed 5000 people with five loaves of bread. By now, word had probably gotten out that he had walked on water as well. So, it's a little funny that they are asking for a sign. Hasn't he given them a sign?

This questions launches Jesus into a detailed discourse of the bread from heaven. He tells them he is the bread of life and that he came down from heaven. He tells them that anyone who believes in him will never hunger or thirst. So now they stop asking Jesus questions, and instead, they grumble their next question.

John 6:42:

"Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

Instead of clarifying the situation, Jesus starts to make things even more complicated. He tells them "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (v 51). The metaphor that Jesus is using is getting strange, and so they have even more questions. In exasperation, they ask,

John 6:52:

"How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Look at this list of questions. If we try to generalize them a bit, we'll find that these are the same kinds of questions that people today are asking.

The first has to do with some basic information about what makes Jesus special. Something about this Jesus seems a bit exceptional to them. Somehow he got to Capernaum without a boat. They might have heard rumors of his walking on water, but they couldn't believe it. So they ask him. Who are you, Jesus? This first question has to do with the identity of Jesus.

The second question is one of the main questions we always have. What do I have to do? How does this affect me? Most people want to do the right thing. They may not phrase it this way, but they want to be "doing the works of God." This has to do with the purpose of humanity.

Then this crowd gets really interested in proof. They want to be sure that Jesus is the real deal. They want a sign from him. This is the classic, "if Jesus just appeared to me, then I'd be sure." What more do they want? Jesus has been healing people. That's why 5000 of them came out to hear him in the first place. He fed them all with a little boy's lunch. Now, they're asking for a sign?

The people around us ask for the same kind of thing. They want proof that this is true for them. In our culture, it becomes really personal. People want something in their experience. They want an experience of proof.

Jesus speaks about how he came down from heaven, and now the crowd is starting to doubt him. They can grasp that something is different about Jesus, but they are not ready to believe that he is from heaven. They are now focused on the humanity of Jesus. People in our culture do that same thing. Most people are actually fascinated by Jesus, but they are convinced that he is simply another significant historical figure. Remarkable, maybe, but not divine.

Finally, the crowd starts to think that this conversation is a bit too weird. Eating Jesus' flesh? Bread from heaven? Eternal life? They are more focused on their everyday existence. Jesus' words don't seem to address their needs. The experience seems irrelevant and mystical and strange. They have serious doubts about the relevance of Jesus.

Aren't many of these questions the same ones that people around us are asking? There are others, but these are some of the big ones.

For the most part, Jesus doesn't answer them. At least not yet. He could have told the crowd he walked on water! That's a great answer. But he doesn't. He has a different goal.

But there is one question Jesus does answer. It's shocking how clear his answer is. Jesus is famous for answering a question with a question or talking about something other than what was originally asked. But in response to the question, "what must we do?" his answer is short, easy to understand, and a one-to-one answer to their question.

John 6:29:

Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

This was one of the clearest statements Jesus made. If you want a work to do, here it is: believe. Believe in Jesus.

Jesus isn't uninterested in answers. He is just focused on a simple answer about the grand work of God in the world rather than addressing all of their particular questions.

The people are asking about bread and getting from one place to another and Jesus' parents. Jesus is talking about Moses leading God's people out of slavery; God providing bread for forty years in the desert. Jesus claims that he is a kind of bread that saves people today. This salvation lasts for eternity.

The people want details. Jesus has a grand narrative. He wants them to recognize that he offers something powerful. They don't have to understand everything about it. They just need to be compelled to follow him and learn more along the way.

We don't need to have answers to all the questions. We just need to know the big story that God is telling and to understand that Jesus is at the center of it. Don't worry about answers. Worry about the story. People need the story of Jesus more than they need answers.

I am convinced that the story of Christ in the world is the most powerful and beautiful and compelling story that the world has to offer. It begins with God's delicate creation of humankind to bear his image. It takes a tragic turn when that creation falls into sin and brokenness. The world becomes marked with pain and violence and hatred and anger. But God doesn't lose hope. He goes to great lengths to reconcile his people to himself.

Eventually, God goes to the ultimate length. He enters into the existence of his creation and suffers at the hand of the violence, anger, and hatred that he desperately wants to heal. By doing so, he makes possible forgiveness and restoration and real justice and healing. For those who choose to follow Jesus, that's the kind of life they are empowered to live.

That's the big story that people need to hear. If you count yourself as a follower of Jesus, you already know that story. You know enough that you became his follower. You have your own personal story, and your little story is just a mini re-telling of the big story of God.

I recently heard a segment on NPR about a woman named Lisa Daniels whose son had been shot dead by a drug dealer. Her son was in a dark place. He was actually planning on robbing his dealer. But things took a different turn, and he lost his life.

Lisa went through a process of grief but ultimately found forgiveness. She was asked to read a victim statement at the sentencing of the dealer, who was convicted for murder. That statement is a heartfelt plea for the judge to be lenient on the man who killed her son.

What struck me most was the response of Terri Gross, the interviewer for NPR. "I think it's really a remarkable story. And I'm so glad that you wrote about it. And she started a restorative justice group."³

It's really a remarkable story. The story of Lisa Daniels is the story of Christ. It's the story of the birth of the church. A young man loses his life, and out of that death began a restorative justice group. That's basically what we are. The church is the world's largest restorative justice group. Born out of the murder of an innocent victim. Fueled by forgiveness and a desire to see others healed and restored.

Our culture may seem antagonistic to Christians and to the church. But the big story is compelling and beautiful and the idea of a group of people who band together to work toward justice in their lives and in the world is attractive.

This is the story Jesus wants the crowd to see. Creation. Fall. Depravity and brokenness. Forgiveness. Provision. Restoration. Life.

If you are a follower of Jesus, you know this story. You've seen it in your life. That's the only answer you need. As Jesus' encounter with the crowd wraps up, we see how this plays out in the life of his disciples.

Disciples Respond to Jesus

This has been a hard conversation so far. Instead of drawing people in, Jesus seems to be confusing them more. In fact, in verse 60, we read that the disciples asked their own question. They said, "This is a hard saying. Who can listen to it?"

Jesus knew they were having a tough time. He wanted them to really face into their struggle. His own disciples were turning away. Here is how Jesus responds:

John 6:66-69:

After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. 67 So Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, 69 and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

Jesus has said a lot of confusing things. Not even his closest disciples understand everything he's talking about. Even Peter is confused. But in the midst of that confusion, Peter declares one of my favorite statements in the Bible.

Peter acknowledges that faith involves questions without answers. He doesn't understand everything. Notice that he doesn't say, "It's okay, Jesus. They might be confused, but I see what you're trying to say." He doesn't say that at all. He admits that he is just as confused as anyone else.

But Peter also acknowledges that there is nowhere else to turn to find answers to those questions. "Where else are we going to go?" Peter sees that the problem isn't unanswered questions. Every world view and every system has those. But only Jesus seems to have at least one answer that is compelling enough to keep following him.

Faith isn't destroyed by unanswered questions. Faith includes unanswered questions. Faith includes unanswered questions.

In 1817 Baron Karl von Drais invented what he called the Laufmaschine. That's German for "running machine."⁴ It was the first real commercial appearance of the bicycle. There were no pedals. You just pushed with your feet and glided on the two wheels. And it worked.

Earlier I told you that many people think the bicycle works because of the principle of angular momentum. That physics principle was defined in the modern sense for the first time in the 1858 publication of the Manual of Applied Mechanics.⁵

That means that for 40 years, people were riding primitive bicycles with no idea how it worked. And for the last 150 years, people have been riding bicycles, but even the best physicists had it wrong in their understanding of how it worked.

Think about that. If you can ride a bicycle, you have been successfully riding a bicycle for however many years you've been doing that, without knowing the answer to the most basic question you could ask: how does this work?

Even without that answer, you've done a fine job of bicycling.

The goal is not to answer people's questions. The goal is to have faith in Jesus. Unanswered questions are rarely the real stumbling block to authentic faith in Jesus. Some people ask questions because they've already decided not to believe in Jesus. Some people ask questions because they are afraid of something else. Listen to the questions. Listen to the people asking them.

In reality, there are really good answers to most of the really hard questions out there. But even if you could give all those good answers, that doesn't solve the problem for people. The goal isn't answered questions. The goal is faith.

Peter says "we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One." It starts with faith. Faith becomes the place where you explore those questions. First, you believe. Then you come to know.

All of those unanswered questions are still there for me. But faith is the library where I'm working to explore the answers. If I abandoned faith in Christ, I'd still have all of those questions, but I'd have no place to ask them—no community to explore them with and no authoritative revelation to turn to.

This passage (John 6:66–69) may be the single most critical encouragement for my own faith in Christ. I have so many unanswered questions. I could list them. Some of them I have tentative answers to. Some of them I have no idea of the answer. Sometimes I wonder whether this whole thing doesn't make any sense at all.

But like Peter, I look around me and don't see any better alternative. If I gave up on Jesus because he didn't answer my questions, then I'd have no Jesus and even more unanswered questions. That's no solution! So even though I have unanswered questions, I follow Jesus because he has something powerful. I love the way Peter put it, "You have the words of eternal life."

I think many of you are the same way. Many of you have unanswered questions about Jesus. I know because you've asked me those questions and I haven't been able to answer them for you. But still, you're here, worshipping and wondering at the foot of the cross.

Here's what this means for us as we share our faith with others: You believe in Jesus without answers to their questions. So why do you think that someone else won't be able to believe without answers? When they ask questions that you can't answer, say "I know! I have the

same exact question, and I wish I knew a great answer. I'm right there with you."

Unanswered questions are okay. They are part of the process. Give the people you talk to the dignity of having their own journey. No one wants to be pressured. No one actually wants easy answers. What we all want is the freedom to wrestle with things. In the asking of their questions, pray that they will see Jesus and hear the words of eternal life.

Conclusion

Most of you can ride a bicycle even though you have no idea how it actually works. There is all of our education in this room and we can't even explain why a bicycle works.

Many of you have faith in Jesus even though you have many of unanswered questions about him and the church and history and theology and the everything in between. But still, you believe.

If you believe without answers to your questions, then others can too. The whole goal is faith. It begins with faith. Then comes the long process of exploring all your questions in the presence of God. That's what following Jesus is all about. I'm convinced there is no better place to explore our questions about God than from the position of faith in Christ.

We can let the Spirit work in people's lives. We can't give anyone faith. We can invite people to explore. We can invite them to pray and reach out to God. We can invite them to ask God for faith.

If you're scared of people asking you questions that you can't answer, don't be! That's okay. "I don't know" or "I have the same question" is a great answer to a difficult question. I say that all the time.

Instead of answering people questions, invite them to join you on the journey of faith. Look to the one who has the words of eternal life. Leave space for questions. Invite people to faith.

Endnotes

¹ Natalie Wolchover, "7 Simple Questions with No Answers." (*LifeScience*, September 13, 2012), <https://www.livescience.com/34215-simple-questions-scientists-really-should-have-answered-by-now.html>.

² Natalie Wolchover, "A Different Kind Of Theory Of Everything." (*The New Yorker*, February 19, 2019), <https://www.newyorker.com/science/elements/a-different-kind-of-theory-of-everything>)

³ Terry Gross, "An American Summer" Looks At How Gun Violence "Gets In People's Bones," NPR: National Public Radio, Fresh Air, KQED, San Francisco, CA: KQED, March 5, 2019.

⁴ "Karl Drais." Wikipedia.org, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Drais (accessed March 7, 2019).

⁵ William J. M. Rankine, "*A Manual of Applied Mechanics*," (London and Glasgow: Richard Griffin and Company, Glasgow, 1858)