

Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

In 1975, Monty Python set out on a farcical search for something that had captivated the imagination of western Christians since the 12th Century, the Holy Grail. The story of this most publicized and precious relic in the history of Christendom originated in the year 717, when a hermit monk reported he had a vision about the dish Jesus used at the Last Supper. During the medieval period, the mythology surrounding the Holy Grail expanded, and it came to be recognized as an object that could bring healing and even eternal life. Reportedly, it was not just the dish that Jesus used at the Last Supper. It came to be described more like a chalice, and it was understood to be the very chalice in which Joseph of Arimathea (the man who buried Jesus) was said to have collected the blood of Christ at the foot of the cross. Shortly after Christ's death and resurrection, Joseph was said to have traveled to what is today Great Britain, taking the chalice with him. But alas, the chalice went missing. This was a convenient turn of events for King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, because their search for the Holy Grail kept them busy for a very long time. Similarly, real life Crusaders who sought to rid the Holy Land of Muslims also pursued the Holy Grail on their journeys that ironically mixed violence and faith. Along with Monty Python, in our day, cultural icons Indiana Jones and his father, Dr. Henry Jones, Sr., also obsessed over finding the Holy Grail. Today, historian Richard Barber, who has written a book on the topic of the Holy Grail, says, "There are so many people out there looking for the thing. Actually it's more exciting that someone can imagine something in the 12th century ... that is still a hot concept 800 years later."¹

While today most everyone understands the Holy Grail to be a mythical object, we are still captivated by the idea of it—the idea that a physical object still could exist which was in use at the most holy site of our faith, at the cross of our Savior Jesus, who died so that we might live and was resurrected, showing God's ultimate power over death. The search for the Holy Grail symbolizes our strain over time and space to grasp onto something, anything that can connect us with Jesus' death and resurrection. A physical relic, an object, would help us to believe. But obviously, in a physical world that decays and disintegrates, the likelihood of a physical object surviving from Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is pretty much impossible.

So what does remain? What is a tangible element that crosses centuries and geography, that literally transcends time and space and that today, just like 2000 years ago, grips our beings and leads us to step into a faith that much of the post-modern world has rejected? The most important tangible element that bridges the 2000-year divide is described in Psalm 118:1-2, and that is love—God's love. Psalm 118 tells us *his [God's] steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."*

God's steadfast love that extends across generations and geography is difficult to describe, because there is not an adequate English word that translates the Hebrew term that shows up here in Psalm 118. Bible translators have had a hard time figuring out how to translate the Hebrew word that in this version is translated *steadfast love*, but in other translations shows up as *lovingkindness*. The Hebrews understood God's love to be unique, so unique that in English we

¹ <http://science.nationalgeographic.com/science/archaeology/holy-grail/>

need a much longer explanation than one word to understand it. The Hebrew word means love that is mixed with loyalty, persistence, steadiness and reliability. Still, all of these words aren't enough to fully describe God's love. According to Hebrew scholar Norman Snaith, going beyond loyalty and persistence, the term we translate as *steadfast love* also means that "God won't let go." Snaith explains that while God requires righteousness, because of his love for us God's mercy is even stronger than the demand that we be righteous. Snaith says, "[God's] demand for righteousness is insistent, and it is always at the maximum intensity. The loving-kindness [or steadfast love] of God means that his mercy is greater even than that."² While guilt may torment us for whatever our past holds, God's love never lets go of us, so that God will always grant us mercy instead of punishment when we ask.

Understanding intellectually these characteristics of God's love is important, because when we understand personally this love, we begin to be transformed. But God's love doesn't just sit in our brains or our beings. The power of this love is evident through the way in which the world has changed because of it. I've talked before about the book I use in my "History of Western Civilization" class. This textbook approaches the life and ministry of Jesus purely from a secular point of view. It doesn't present Jesus as the Son of God, nor does it acknowledge the miracles that he performs. It portrays him as a political threat who undermined the governmental foundation of Galilee, and it presents the resurrection as an assertion made by his followers, rather an actual event. Nevertheless, this book cannot deny that the whole world changed after Jesus. The presence of Christians in the Roman Empire unsettled the culture. Small as the group was to begin with, they resisted cultural norms in ways that were disconcerting. The power of God's love began to seep into Roman culture in ways that were attractive and liberating.

Sociologist Rodney Stark explains the Roman Empire into which Christianity was born as a "cultural chaos produced by the crazy quilt of ethnic diversity and the blazing hatreds entailed thereby." He says, "people of many cultures [who spoke] many languages, [and worshipped] all manner of gods, had been dumped together helter-skelter."³ The healing salve that Christians poured into this environment was the message that Paul delivered to the household of the Gentile centurion Cornelius in our passage from Acts. Prior to Peter's encounter with Cornelius, the disciples and other Christians believed that Jesus, whom they knew to be the Messiah, had come to bring life and salvation to Jewish people, to the Israelites. But Cornelius, not a Jew but rather a Roman centurion, sought more than what the pagan gods offered him; he wanted a spiritual life that was relevant to his world. When God gave Peter a vivid vision that revealed to him that Christianity was not a faith that should be limited to Jewish people, Peter was compelled to address Cornelius' household with these words from Acts 10. *I truly understand*, he said, *that God shows no partiality*. Partiality means bias or prejudice. Peter was saying that God has no prejudice against any culture or ethnicity. It doesn't matter what language one speaks, or what one's heritage is, the steadfast love of God that won't let go is available to everyone through the death of Jesus on the cross.

Another radical stance that the first Christians took is that they gave equal status in the church to women and to slaves. This was a remarkable development that turned Roman culture on its head. Sociologist Stark says, "Christianity prompted liberating social relations between the sexes and

² <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chesed.html>

³ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/starktheology.html>

within the family.... It also greatly modulated class differences—more than rhetoric was involved when slave and noble greeted one another as brothers in Christ.”⁴

Overwhelming evidence exists of the fact that the love of God we see through Jesus was powerful and transformative in the early church and throughout history. God’s love changes things; it changes us, and it changes the world. In the absence of a physical object, like the Holy Grail, God’s love has transcended the 2000-year separation between Christ’s death and resurrection until today. All of that time God’s love has been steadfast, loyal, persistent; it has never let go.

I pray that we as a church continue to exhibit the radically liberating love of God in our community and world. Our world is similar in some ways to the world into which the church was born. Ethnic and religious hatred and violence seem to have been unleashed throughout the world, even here, in the freest of all nations that the world has ever seen. Just like the early church, our actions must reveal the radically liberating and inviting aspects of Christ’s love.

After the terrorist attack in Paris on November 13, 2015, a reporter from the *New York Times* interviewed Bono from U2. U2 was in Paris at the time of the attack, preparing for a concert there that was subsequently postponed until December. The reporter questioned Bono about the wisdom of having a concert that would attract so many people into one place so soon after another concert hall had been bombed. Bono’s response reminded me of what Christians represent in a violent world. He said, “ISIS and these kinds of extremists are a death cult. We’re a life cult.”⁵

The love of God that took Jesus to the cross and brought him to life again brings life, rather than death and destruction, to the world in which we live. Let us, today, celebrate God’s love! Every day going forward, let us, like Peter, follow God’s leading and activate God’s love in the world.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/arts/music/u2-preaching-defiance-heads-back-to-paris.html?_r=0