

[Monkees] The Monkees are a strange band. They were originally formed for a TV show (called *The Monkees*) in 1965. The TV show was about four guys who wanted to be the Beatles really badly, but were never going to make it. The TV show featured music from the band (which, again, was basically fake). But the Monkees actually got pretty popular, selling more records than both the Beatles and the Rolling Stones combined in 1967.

I grew up listening to oldies, so I knew plenty of Monkees songs, from *Last Train to Clarksville* to *Daydream Believer* to the song we're exploring today, *I'm a Believer*. I was too young to see the TV show in its original run, but I caught it pretty often in syndication, especially as a young kid. In fact, of all the TV I no doubt watched as a kid, one of the clearest memories I have is of *The Monkees*, and it's an episode featuring this song (which is part of why I chose it).

The episode centers on one of the guys falling under the spell of a gypsy - she has the power to hypnotize men with her gaze, and so the episode's plot features the other guys trying to rescue their friend, who is totally enraptured by this woman's gaze.

On that level, the song makes sense... it's literally when one of the Monkees sees the gypsy's face that he falls in love with her.

[True Love vs. Magic Spell?] On another level, though, the song always bothered me. Maybe that's because the song itself is about true love. The song's narrator had given up on finding true love, despite the fact that he sees it all around him. But when he encounters the object of the song, he falls completely, madly and instantly into the love he'd given up on.

Which is sort of the *opposite* of what the TV show was doing. In the TV show, he's tricked into love. The Love he experiences is a false love, a shallow bewitchment. It's magic in the crudest sense of the word.

That tension has always lain behind the Monkees' music for me - the disjoint I felt when I hear the song and remember the TV show.

It's a tension many of us feel with religion as well. We talk of loving God, but when it comes down to it, our religion seems to be more about what God *does* for us. Why should we love God? Because God keeps us out of hell, or makes our lives better. If we do enough of the right things - go to church and give money and read our Bibles, then hopefully God will do stuff for us - give us that close parking spot or land a job or heal an illness or save our kids.

No one is exactly sure what the divine exchange rate is, how much I have to do to get, but it feels like it's always a little bit more than I'm doing.

[True Love vs. Manipulation] And when the framework for our religion is this giving-to-get, talk of love rings hollow. It's hard to imagine God loves us when we never feel like we're doing enough.

And it's *really* hard to love God when we feel like we're trying to live up to some impossible standard.

We end up like the narrator of "I'm a Believer" - jaded, convinced all the talk of love in religion is nothing more than a fairy tale. Disappointed. Defeated.

We're right to be disillusioned about that sort of religion. Even a kid can tell the difference between love that's based on manipulation and genuine love. We can tell the difference between religion that's based on manipulation, on fear and achievement, and genuine faith.

And for those of us who have given up on religion as a fairy tale, the good news is that what worked for the Monkees works for us too: when we come face-to-face with God, we don't need convincing. When we see that the heart of Jesus' religion is not behavior modification, but new life, we cannot help but become transfixed. When we see Jesus, we see the God who abandoned heaven to become like us, to show us the way to life, and then gave up his very life so that we could join him in that life.

When we see Jesus, we see the purest demonstration of love in human history. Confronting that love transforms us, transfixes us, and makes believers out of us.

To be clear: the only way we can escape the enchantment of false religion is by coming face-to-face with the crucified and resurrected Jesus.

I don't mean that in the gross way you often hear it in Church. Too often, Jesus' suffering is paraded before us to make us feel guilty - LOOK HOW BAD CRUCIFIXION HURT JESUS! Every time you sin, you're pounding the nail into his hands!

It's an effective enchantment, but an enchantment all the same. The worse I feel about myself, the harder I'll work, because the more I perceive my need.

[Illustrate Magic] I use the word "enchantment" not just because that Monkees episode featured a gypsy. It's fair to call the sort of religion we've been talking about "magical" in the most direct sense of the word. Magic is an appeal to something supernatural to alter reality. When we look to God to alter our world - in big or small ways - we're using magical thinking. We're treating God as a kind of genie, hoping that if we phrase our wishes in the right way, or do the right combination of behaviors, we can get God to do something out of the ordinary for us.

Magic Religion is all about manipulating God to get what we want. Ironically, we in turn are manipulated - to go to church more, to give more money, to read our bibles more, to try try try. No wonder we end up disillusioned and defeated - no one believes in magic anymore.

The religion Jesus invites us into is wholly different. It's not based on God tweaking our lives, making minor improvements here and there, as long as we try hard enough. Jesus' religion is

the faith of a God who would rather die than live without us. Jesus' faith is a God who loves us enough to die in our place. Ironically, when we see Jesus' death, when we become transfixed by his sacrifice, we are not just rescued from Death. Rather, having freed us from Death, Jesus invites us to follow him to the Cross. Jesus' death is an invitation for us to die as well.

Which doesn't sound very loving, I'll grant you. But bear with me. [Scripture Slide] If you have a Bible, turn with me to John 6.

As you're turning to John 6, let me be honest with you: there's no getting around what it means to follow Jesus. He is clear on multiple occasions he didn't come to prop up our happiness, to tweak the lives we're currently living. Again and again, his call to his followers is a call to follow him all the way to his cross, to die with him.

And if you're thinking that all sounds a little creepy, you're not the only one. In this story we're going to read together, Jesus has just fed 5,000 people. It's one of his most famous miracles - his teaching had begun to draw crowds, so he finds a field and 5,000 people show up to hear him. The day wears on, everyone's hungry and no one brought food. Jesus miraculously produces enough food to feed everyone, with quite a few leftovers.

Needless to say, it's quite the spectacle.

This story happens the next day, when the crowd continues to follow him. Again and again, they beg Jesus to repeat his miraculous feeding, to give them more bread.

They want a magic trick.

And Jesus refuses, telling them his ministry is about spiritual food, about the Kingdom of God, not about physical bread.

Then - as if that's not a good answer, the crowd starts quoting the Bible to him. They point out that when God led the people into the wilderness, he gave them bread every day to eat. They suggest that if Jesus really is God, then he should be giving them bread every day, just like God did. (That's hilarious, isn't it?)

Beginning in verse 47, I want to read Jesus' response, to the end of the exchange. Pay attention to what Jesus says, how the crowd reacts to him and what the final outcome is:

"Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

I have a theory that the author of this story cleaned up the language here a bit.

Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them."

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

That's right... Jesus *loses* a lot of the crowd. They simply aren't interested in a God who won't perform magic tricks for them on demand.

With this mass exodus, Jesus turns to his inner circle to see if they will leave. And Peter's response is our rallying cry today:

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."

To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life! We have come to believe you are the Holy One of God!

Peter doesn't say, "No Jesus... we *totally* get that you're speaking in metaphor here and that after you die and come back from the dead, we'll observe this as something we'll call a Communion Meal."

He doesn't say, "Those guys are so dumb because they don't understand. But all us guys here... we have it figured out."

No, Peter seems to be as confused and troubled as anyone who left. But when Jesus asks if he's leaving, he shrugs his shoulders and says, "Where are we going to go? As weird as you are -- and you're *super* weird, you are the source of life. You are God. No matter how weird it gets, no matter how troublesome things are, I'm in. 100%."

This is the confession for Catalyst -- we aren't a church that claims to have all the answers. We won't pretend to have a secret spiritual decoder ring that gives us special insight. And we won't claim we get it right all the time.

We won't say our lives are always perfect, that we don't have any problems. We *certainly* won't claim we are perfect. Hang out with us for very long and you'll see we do Church warts and all.

So when you ask, "Why do you believe in this Jesus thing? How do you deal with all the contradictions in the Bible or the tension between faith and science or the scandals that continue to plague the Church? How can you believe in the face of all that?"

We shrug our shoulders and say, "Where else can we go? Jesus is the source of life. We have come to believe, and we know he is God."

It sure *sounds* like bewitchment, doesn't it? As though, despite how problematic everything is, how messy faith and life are, we're clinging almost blindly to this faith.

But bewitchment is exactly what Jesus is rejecting by refusing to give the crowds more bread. They *have* become enamored of him. They *love* the idea of a god who is essentially a genie, granting wish after yeasty wish.

And then Jesus tells them he won't give them anymore food. Which sounds like something of a bait and switch, like he's some sort of divine dealer - "Magic bread? Yeah... first taste is free. Then you have to start working for it."

But Jesus insists that's not what's happening, that in fact he is offering them a more vital food, a spiritual food that is his very body.

Jesus insists something more than bread is at stake. And when he refuses to do any more magic tricks, they get angry. So Jesus calls them out - remember, he says,

"Does this offend you? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!"

Jesus essentially says, If you can't handle me telling you to eat my flesh and drink my blood, you're *really* not going to like it when I ascend to where I was before!

Which - frankly - doesn't make *any* sense. They're mad because Jesus won't do a magic trick (make more bread), and then it *sounds like* Jesus says they'll be offended when he goes back to Heaven (which is a pretty awesome trick, David Blane eat your heart out!).

Except that's not what Jesus means when he says he's going to "ascend to where he was before." In John's gospel, Jesus is *constantly* talking about how he's come down from the Father and when the hour is right he'll return.

In chapter 3, Jesus makes it clear what he means by "going up": **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."** -- John 3:14-15

In John, for Jesus, "ascending" or "going up" *always* references Jesus' crucifixion. Always.

Which makes what he says make a *lot* more sense.

To this crowd who wants a genie God, a magic-worker, Jesus says, I won't be that for you. You don't need magic tricks. You need my body and blood. You need to feast at my table, to share in the life I'm offering.

And if *that* offends you, you need to get off the Jesus train *right now*. Because we're heading for a cross. If you don't like a God who won't give you bread on demand, you *really* aren't going to like a God who dies rather than fight back.

Jesus says, I'm the *anti*-genie. I'm the anti-magician.

You want a magic trick and I'm offering you love.

That's right - love is the opposite of enchantment. (Which we already knew, right? That's why that episode of *The Monkees* never sat well with me. Because the song is all about encountering true love, and the episode was about enchantment.)

Enchantment is a trick. It reduces love to a commodity that can be bought or sold with enough hard work or spiritual brownie points or self-righteousness. But Jesus tells us what true love *really* looks like later in John's gospel, just before he's finally lifted up. He says, **"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."** -- John 15:13

Enchantment is give and take. It reduces the other to an object, manipulating them for your own good. Love is giving the self for the good of the beloved.

Jesus says, Follow me long enough, and you'll come face-to-face with the God who is divine love. The God who refused to manipulate us from Heaven with the fear of Hell, but came to us,

among us, as one of us, to rescue us. You'll meet the God who harrowed Hell itself that we might have life.

And when you meet that God face to face, that God will invite you to follow him. Through the wilderness. Through the valley of the shadow of death to a cross. He will invite you to abandon your Self in imitation of him, to give yourself up for the good of those in your life: your family, your friends and even your enemies.

Instead of offering you magic tricks, this God will call you to come and die. But it is a death of Love, a death of self-abandonment, and it is a death that anticipates resurrection.

Love is the only appropriate response to the God who died for us. In a world full of false hopes, of illusions parading themselves as magic, of enchantments, God is raised up before us, dying on a cross, and we are transfixed. In that moment, when we come truly face-to-face with this God, we become believers. Not because we have heard a new bit of information, but because we know in the deepest, innermost depths of our Selves, the places where our secret hopes and secret shames live. We know there that we are fully known, fully loved. And it's no magic trick.

That tension we feel between enchantment and love is false - religion doesn't offer us enchantment and expect us to believe it's love. We are the problem - we've mixed the two up.

When I started to write this message, I tried to look up that episode of *The Monkees* so I could show a clip of it. I figured out that there is no such episode. There's an episode with an enchanting gypsy. And there's an episode that features the song "I'm a Believer". But they're two different episodes. I must have seen them both as a kid and conflated them, remembered them as one story, and my mind filled in the gaps.

Brothers and sisters, this is what we have done with God - we've heard stories of God's love, and we've lived in the world of give and take (just like in the song - I thought love was more or less a given thing. It seemed the more I gave, the less I got.).

We've conflated those two stories and created a religion that's a mirage, a false faith of legalism and shame and guilt.

I learned my mistake when I saw with my own eyes the two different episodes of *The Monkees*. So too we if we want to escape the enchantment of magical religion, we must come face to face with the God who died for us. We must answer his call to follow him to a cross, confessing with Peter, "Lord, where else would we go? You alone have the words of life!"

Following Jesus looks like forgiving those who wrong you, choosing not to retaliate.

Following Jesus looks like protecting the relationships that give you life. That means saying No to what draws you away from them.

Following Jesus also looks like quarantining the relationships that destroy you. Sometimes that's the hardest thing to do.

Following Jesus looks like serving your friends, your family, your coworkers, your parents, your children, your c-group, your community, your enemies.

If you walk this path, the path of Jesus, you will come face-to-face with this God, the God who died for you. And this God will invite you to join him.

Will you listen? Will you respond?

Communion Set-Up