



Pastor Robyn Hogue

## SERMON

### Lifelines

Luke 11:1-13

July 24, 2016

Skyline Presbyterian Church

Ever watch the television show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*? It's back in syndication. The host is good. The set is good. The music is good. The money is good. Part of the show's appeal rests on the fact that the questions are relatively easy and that the format is pretty interactive.

Concerning the questions, most of us could answer some of them. And some of us could answer most of them. They draw heavily upon popular culture. And they are all multiple choice. The right answer is staring you in the face, which means you don't have to know it, so much as recognize it. And once you make it to the chair opposite the host, there is no other contestant to compete against but there are a lot of people (seen and unseen) with whom you can collaborate. To secure the million dollar prize, the contestant needs to correctly answer fifteen questions, but a lifeline can be used three times in order to soften the impact of ignorance.

Picture a relatively simple question:

*Bratwurst, as an edible delicacy, is most commonly associated with what country?*

- a. Italy
- b. Hungary
- c. Germany
- d. New Guinea

And, for the sake of argument, let's say that you have never seen, cooked or eaten bratwurst. Which lifelines could you employ? Well, you could ask the host to remove two wrong answers (presumably eliminating Italy and New Guinea) in what's called "The 50/50". Or, you could poll the members of the audience in what's called "ask the audience" who would then punch their individual opinions into keypads, giving you an instantaneous spreadsheet of response. Obviously, if 94 percent of the audience settled on one answer, you'd be foolish not to go with it. Your third option would be to phone a friend who would then have 20 seconds to ponder "bratwurst" or look it up in a dictionary. This is now called the "plus one" lifeline.

The correct answer, of course, is "c. Germany" ... which you might have known if you had known anything about the German language, if not from your gourmet hot dog selections at the baseball park. But if you didn't know, help was available ... presuming you were willing to call upon it, or trust it, once received.

You see where this is going, don't you? We're talking about choices here. Sometimes the stakes are minimal, but sometimes, they are incredibly high. And some of the most difficult decisions center around multiple choices. Which offer? Which road? Which route on which road? Easy or hard? Cut the corner? Play the angle? Today? Tomorrow? Now? Never? It's not by accident that one of America's favorite poems begins: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood ..." But had Robert Frost lived longer and become a part of the multi-optional society we have now created, his depiction of "forking roads" most likely

wouldn't have stopped at two.

All kinds of choices. Right and wrong. Legal and illegal. Personal and communal. We're talking about vocational choices, relational choices and financial choices. So how do we go about it? Well, let's stick with the three lifelines. After all, they aren't called "lifelines" for nothing. Use them correctly, you go on. Fail to use them, you will likely go down.

### **First Lifeline:**

*Simplify life by eliminating those answers that are obviously wrong.* But how might we do that? At the risk of sounding simplistic, we might become students of scripture. But don't misread me here. The Bible is not an instantaneous answer book. Most people are not going to be successful if they approach the Bible with a dilemma, open it at random, and then let their mind devour the first sentence their fingers discover.

Worse yet, in addition to there being dilemmas the Bible will not instantaneously enlighten, there will be riddles the Bible will never completely resolve. That's because the writers wrestled with the same things with which we wrestle. And the Bible records that wrestling ... which is, in and of itself, helpful.

That being said, the Bible is clear that some choices will not work; that some roads lead down dead ends; and that some options will turn out to be life-destroying and guilt-producing no matter how many people try them while believing themselves to be the exception. The Bible isn't going to solve everything. But it is going to take us through a whole lot of "been there, done that" stories that didn't get anybody anywhere. I realize there is a human propensity for learning things the hard way, but if we believe that "trial and error" is the only way folks ever learn, we might as well surrender the notions that history can be informative and training can be productive. If, in a class for would-be chainsaw operators, the instructor centers in on a particularly dangerous behavior and says, "Remember, the last 17 guys who tried this now purchase single cufflinks," I'd probably listen. Well, the Bible can reward the serious reader similarly by removing the least productive answers from the game. These answers are unproductive, not only because God has decreed them so, but because time has proved them so.

### **Second Lifeline:**

*Ask the Audience* (which, in this case, would seem to suggest "ask the congregation".) I don't want us to dismiss this suggestion by viewing it with a literalness that is ridiculous. I am not suggesting we replace the Sunday sermon with a dilemma-of-the-week, while encouraging you to record your responses on keypads found in your pew racks. (Although there have, undoubtedly, been worse abuses of a Sunday morning.) Instead, I am suggesting that while a Christian congregation might not know the answer to everything ... and certainly will not agree on the answer to everything ... a Christian congregation comes to the discussion with a leg up on all lesser constituencies. That's because churches are filled with people who, when they talk about pursuing the "good life," are not only talking about the "sweet life of satisfying personal appetites"... but the "Godly life" including, by inference, the "moral life". Does this happen in every church? Probably not. And in churches where it happens, does it involve everybody? Most likely, no. But I am here to tell you that clusters within congregations do provide opportunities for wisdom and discernment.

It could be a group engaged in Bible or book study. It could be a seminar talking about ethical issues. It could even be a circle of people sitting in the Fellowship Hall talking about contemporary movies and their content. Such clusters of Christian friends can provide forums wherein we can sharpen our thinking and refine our choices.

I have known a quite a few people who have quietly introduced a personal issue into a group discussion and drawn great benefit from the conversation that took place. Sometimes folks say to the group: "I've got this problem and I would appreciate your counsel." More often, they pose it as somebody else's problem or as a hypothetical problem or a problem faced by a character in something they're reading. Later, the person may say to us privately, "I really learned a lot from so-and-so's comment in this morning's class." or "I was really surprised with the group's reaction to the dilemma I posed."

### **Lifeline Three:**

*Ask a Friend.* After all, that's what they're there for, don't you know. Who is more likely to look at the world with lenses similar to yours than a friend in the church? Who is more likely to affirm values similar to yours? And who is more likely to follow a Lord similar to yours? Which means that if you find yourself at some critical juncture in life (unsure of which way to go), why wouldn't you turn to a friend who would know where you were coming from, who would know something of your story, and who would know the impossibility of separating your history from Christ's story.

Jesus told a story about a man who knocked on his friend's door at midnight, saying: "I've just had a hungry houseguest arrive and I have no food to put before him. If you'd be so kind, lend me some bratwurst and some buns." To which the reply came: "Ah, Friend, it's late. You're late and I'm sleepy. Kids are sleepy. Whole darn house is sleepy. Don't have bratwurst. Only have summer sausage. Buns are stale. Refrigerator is padlocked." Which is to say that most friendships have limits.

But, says Jesus, suppose the guy at the door doesn't recognize those limits? Suppose he keeps knocking ... keeps buzzing ... keeps leaning on the doorbell ... keeps calling out your name? Sooner or later, you'll give up, get up and ante up, maybe just so he'll shut up. Which, several verses later, is followed by the kicker: "If he'll do that, how much more will your heavenly Father do for you when you ask ... when you seek ... when you knock?" We're talking connections here ... friends on earth and friends above ... friends in low places and high places.

Everyone needs to have someone they can call at midnight ... or when they run out of bratwurst ... or patience ... or hope. Everyone needs to have someone they can call when they've been dumped and have no honey. Everyone needs to have someone they can call when they need someone to come alongside and have questions that cannot wait till morning.

It recently occurred to me that the highest compliment Jesus paid His disciples was when He said (John 15:15): "I no longer call you servants. I used to call you servants. But now I call you friends." The friend that may have the answer. Or the friend that may be the answer.