

## The Atomic Center of the Gospel Message

1. Warm-up Question: Jeff began Sunday's sermon with an old joke about a computer contest between Jesus and Satan that got interrupted by a power outage. Once the power came back on, Satan had lost everything, but not Jesus – because . . . “Jesus saves.” What's the worst technology disaster you've ever had?
2. The phrase “Jesus saves” is bandied about a lot, especially in religious circles. On Sunday we explored the core of what that means. Jeff shared a story about a congregant who was a spiritual leader in her former church, went through a painful divorce, then was considered unfit to serve. She said, “I feel like a failure. I'm supposed to be a spiritual leader, yet my marriage failed. Who's going to want what I've got? I don't feel like I've been a good witness.” Her statement raises the question: Witness to what? What's the core message we're called to give witness to? Those are rhetorical questions, but now let's tackle our discussion questions.
  - a. Have you been part of a church that taught you're supposed to be a witness? If so, what did it mean in that church to “be a witness?”
  - b. In many churches, being a “witness” means showing people how perfect we are, how we have all the answers, and how smooth and easy our life is. When “being a witness” is understood that way, what problems ensue?
3. Jeff said, “We're not called to give witness to ourselves and what a great Christian we are. We're called to give witness to Jesus – to the goodness of Jesus. Your witness never burns so bright – and gives so much hope to others – as when you screw up big time – do a face plant on the ground – but then get back up, dust yourself off and keep moving forward with hope, confident in the grace of God. You may not look so good, but God shines. And other imperfect people are given hope. They think, ‘Hey, if she can be saved, so can I.’”
  - a. What do you think of that statement? Does it resonate with you or challenge you? Do you agree or disagree?
  - b. Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber says, “The thing I love most about Lutheran theology is that we are simultaneously sinner and saint, 100% of both, all the time.” What do you think she means? Do you agree?
  - c. Read Ephesians 2:1-10. How would you summarize the point being made in this passage?
  - d. How would you define grace? Give an example of a time in your life when you experienced great grace from God or another person?
4. Jeff said, “The Gospel message is not, ‘You too can be perfect and never have another problem in life.’ The Gospel is, ‘God is greater than all your sin and brokenness.’ It's not about our goodness; it's about God's.”

- a. Have you ever known someone who seemed to be trying to be a perfect example of spiritual goodness? Was that good for them? Was it a good witness?
  - b. Jeff shared the embarrassing story of how he recently got behind a slow moving vehicle and honked his horn, only to discover he was honking at two wonderful ladies in our congregation. He said he felt like a failure as a spiritual leader. Truth is, we all mess up a lot. Tell us about a time recently when you failed?
  - c. If we are living the Gospel and truly believe in grace, how should we respond when we fail?
  - d. In II Corinthians 12:9 God says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” What do you think that means?
  - e. What’s the difference between a hypocrite and an imperfect person who’s living in grace?
5. Grace isn’t cheap. Sin is costly. Sin causes great suffering to both the perpetrator and victims – and it put Jesus on the cross. To illustrate what Jesus did on the cross, Jeff told the story of a Polish priest interred at Auschwitz in 1941 who volunteered to take the place of another prisoner sentenced to death by starvation. His request was granted. The priest was killed, the other man lived to be 95.
- a. Imagine yourself as that Polish priest. How would you have felt?
  - b. Imagine yourself as that prisoner who was saved. How would you have felt?
  - c. Read Luke 23:33-43. What do we learn from the thief on the cross about how we are – and aren’t – saved?
6. As a group, read the lyrics to the “Ode to Billie Joe” (on the next page) or listen together to Bobbie Gentry sing it at this link: [youtube.com/watch?v=cJZ\\_ViDAD0E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJZ_ViDAD0E).
- a. How does the story of the song make you feel? What’s its message?
  - b. One interpretation of the story is that Billie Joe and his girlfriend throw their love child off the bridge, then Billie (racked by guilt) jumps, and his girlfriend can’t overcome her guilt and grief. To the extent you’re comfortable sharing, what is it from your past that hangs around your neck like a thousand pound that you struggle to let go of? How can grace help?
  - c. What is it in your present that causes you to say, “What’s wrong with me? Why am I so broken?” How can grace help?
  - d. How can we get better at living in grace?

# Ode To Billie Joe

By Bobbie Gentry

It was the third of June, another sleepy, dusty Delta day.  
I was out choppin' cotton, and my brother was balin' hay.  
And at dinner time we stopped and walked back to the house to eat.  
And mama hollered out the back door, y'all, remember to wipe your feet.  
And then she said, I got some news this mornin' from Choctaw Ridge.  
Today, Billie Joe MacAllister jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge.

And papa said to mama, as he passed around the blackeyed peas,  
Well, Billie Joe never had a lick of sense; pass the biscuits, please.  
There's five more acres in the lower forty I've got to plow.  
And mama said it was shame about Billie Joe, anyhow.  
Seems like nothin' ever comes to no good up on Choctaw Ridge,  
And now Billie Joe MacAllister's jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge.

And brother said he recollected when he, and Tom, and Billie Joe  
Put a frog down my back at the Carroll County picture show.  
And wasn't I talkin' to him after church last Sunday night?  
I'll have another piece-a apple pie; you know, it don't seem right.  
I saw him at the sawmill yesterday on Choctaw Ridge,  
And now ya tell me Billie Joe's jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge.

And mama said to me, child, what's happened to your appetite?  
I've been cookin' all morning, and you haven't touched a single bite.  
That nice young preacher, Brother Taylor, dropped by today.  
Said he'd be pleased to have dinner on Sunday, oh, by the way,  
He said he saw a girl that looked a lot like you up on Choctaw Ridge.  
And she and Billie Joe was throwing somethin' off the Tallahatchie Bridge.

A year has come and gone since we heard the news 'bout Billie Joe.  
And brother married Becky Thompson; they bought a store in Tupelo.  
There was a virus going 'round; papa caught it, and he died last spring,  
And now mama doesn't seem to want to do much of anything.  
And me, I spend a lot of time pickin' flowers up on Choctaw Ridge,  
And drop them into the muddy water off the Tallahatchie Bridge.