



“This is Eternal Life”
Scripture – John 17:1-11
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, May 28, 2017

Last week, you were so helpful with my sermon that I thought I would reach out to you again. I know, be careful about going to the well too many times! I won't ask you to share with your neighbor; I simply want you to share with me what thoughts come to mind when you hear the words “eternal life?” [Immortality. Heaven. Seeing loved ones who died before you. Hope.]

On Memorial Day weekend, when we honor and give thanks for those who have died in service to our country – and following a week when innocents were murdered in terrorist attacks in England and Egypt – it is certainly in order to highlight the theme of eternal life.

Today's gospel lectionary reading comes from the Gospel of John and it mentions eternal life. But before deciphering this opaque passage, I feel compelled to confess my love/hate relationship with this gospel. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is far easier to comprehend. As I once heard a man declare, “In the first three gospels, Jesus speaks in plain English!” Actually Jesus spoke Aramaic and possibly Hebrew, but everyone within earshot understood what this man meant.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus sounds like someone who most of the time could be clearly understood. However, in John, there are times when Jesus pontificates in such lofty jargon that we wonder if we are overhearing a middle-eastern guru speaking in mystical language that only those who know the secret handshake can comprehend.

In the first three gospels, Jesus shares memorable parables and poignant sayings. Despite his use of hyperbole and metaphor, we usually understand the gist of what he's saying. But in John, his words resemble vague, philosophical meanderings.

It is only in the Gospel of John that Jesus says, “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” Hmmm. Another winner comes from the 10th verse of today's passage: “All mine are yours and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.” If you say so.

If Jesus truly communicated with such abstract concepts – and I doubt that he did – his disciples were either constantly raising their hands asking for clarification or felt they were trapped in an ancient version of “Who's on first? What's on second? I don't know is on third.”

Invariably, we use the term “eternal life” to mean what happens to us after we die. However, we discover in the Scriptures that Jesus had a more expansive meaning of the term. For Jesus, “eternal life” referred not only to what happens after we die, but also to *a special state of existence before death*.

If we venture back to the fourth chapter of John, we read the story of Jesus encountering the woman at the well. He tells her that he can give her “living water.” He says, “The water I will give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” He does not mean that he has discovered the fountain of youth, water that possesses powers to allow someone to live forever. He uses the term “eternal life” to mean a unique *quality* of life. In chapter seven, Jesus says it is a life infused with God’s Spirit, and in chapter ten he calls it “abundant life.”

While we view life in this world and life in the next as two distinct modes of existence, Jesus taught that we can experience moments of eternal life not only later, but now. Today and tomorrow. We can obtain a taste of heaven on this side of the veil; which is pretty remarkable given the state of the world for John’s community.

The Gospel of John was written near the end of the first century after the other three gospels had been compiled. He wrote his gospel to a community that was being severely oppressed by the occupying Roman army and persecuted by Jews who tossed them out of the synagogue.

That’s why in the Gospel of John, when Jesus speaks of the “world” he is not talking about God’s good creation. He is talking about a hostile environment – the world is the domain of Satan. In John, the world represents all that opposes God – evil, injustice, immorality – in short, the dark side of life. The author makes this clear early in his gospel when he writes: “the light – meaning Jesus – has come into the world but the people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” (John 3:19)

In our passage today – which is actually part of the closing prayer Jesus prays at the Last Supper – Jesus says that despite the sad shape of the world, his followers can taste eternal life.

What does that mean? It does not mean skipping down streets of gold or being startled by angels playfully dancing. Jesus says, “This is eternal life, that we may know God.” To know God does not mean gaining access to cryptic wisdom about the Transcendent One. To know God is to trust that God is love and that God urges us to allow Christ-like love to pulse through our veins.

When we hear the words “eternal life,” either our cynicism shoots down the notion as wishful thinking, or our thoughts jump to ideas of what happens after death. Is it possible for us to expand our understanding of eternal life to include a certain quality of life during our current existence?

When Jesus speaks of eternal life in the present, I think he is talking about those moments when we become fully alive. When we gaze at one we love and inexpressible feelings explode like a geyser inside of us. When the distress of another pulls us into his orbit. When an injustice ignites a passion to strive for what is right. When the beauty of God’s creation calls out to a place deep within us. When music sends our spirit soaring. When a need prompts us to give generously. When we gather around a table with people we love and enjoy a meal that nourishes our soul. When we are in prayer and draw close to the divine. When we eagerly sacrifice for another.

Author and poet, John O’Donohue writes, “When your life awakens and you begin to sense the destiny that brought you here, you endeavor to live a life that is generous and worthy of the blessing and invitation that is always calling you.”¹ Eternal life *now* is when we have an experience that sparks our soul and transports us to new heights.

Will you lift someone’s spirits today?
Will you release unkind thoughts?
Will you extend courtesy and respect to a stranger?
Will you speak words of healing?

Jesus says, “This is eternal life, that we may know God,” and part of what it means to know God is to trust God for what will become of us after we die, so that we can live today by our hopes, not our fears; by our dreams, not our nightmares.

Cynicism, greed, narcissism, and despair are eager to pilot your life; but putting your trust in God can liberate you from their control so that you can be kind and compassionate, fair and faithful.

As Jesus was giving his final instructions to his disciples, he prayed that they would experience eternal life. The way for them to do it was not to withdraw from the world, nor was it to go along with the ways of the world, but rather to continue Christ’s ministry in the world.

It was as if Jesus threw down a challenge:

Are you going to walk away from the unpleasantness around you?
Are you going to ignore the beggar at your gate?
Are you going to give up on the widow crying for help?
Are you going to simply curse the darkness or are you going to spread some light?

God intends for us to live joyful lives, and we discover joy when we forge loving bonds with others. When we love, our soul touches the soul of another and we desire the same good things for the other that we desire for ourselves. Our purpose is to spread love. If not, we might as well just surf the internet or head to the mall.

NOTES

1. John O’Donohue, *Eternal Echoes*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), p. xxiv.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE ~ SUDIE NIESEN THOMPSON

We praise you, Eternal God, for you are steadfast in your love for us and lavish in showing mercy! We give thanks: that you sent your Son to reveal your grace and truth; that he lived and died to bear witness to your love for us; that he overcame death to summon us into new life. With gratitude for the grace we know in Christ, we turn to you in faith and in hope:

Holy God, we come before you with hearts burdened by sorrow, and hearts that sing for joy. With hearts bursting with gratitude, and hearts that only dare to hope. Yet, we trust that *your* heart breaks with ours, and rejoices with ours ... that your heart is big enough to hold all we carry. So, with confidence, we offer our petitions in Christ’s name. Guide us by your Spirit that our prayers may serve your will and reflect the grace and mercy that flow forth from you.

We pray for this world torn by violence, and lament the pain we see. Compassionate God, dwell with the people of Manchester this day, and in the days ahead, as they grieve the loss of life and their sense of security. Be with every parent who lost a child, and every child who lost a sibling ... with every friend who lost a confidant, and every partner who lost a companion. Be with those who walked away from the blast, and those who rushed toward it. And surround their entire, hurting community with your comfort and peace.

While the eyes of the world are focused on Manchester, we remember that there are *many* people in *many* lands who know (too well) the scourge of violence. We pray, O God, for our sisters and brothers in the Coptic Church in the wake of the vicious and cowardly attack in Egypt, that they may be strengthened in faith, sustained in hope, and assured of your presence. We pray for communities near and far that are marred by conflict and marked by

suffering, and we long for the day when all nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. We know too well that the cost of conflict is great, and we remember all who have died while serving this country. We give thanks for their dedication, their courage, and their willingness to serve, and hope that – one day – no one else will need to pay this price. Receive both our gratitude and our grief for the sacrifices these brave men and women have made, and grant us the imagination and collective will to create a warless world.

Holy God – you have called us into your service, that the world might know your justice and peace, your grace and your joy. By your Spirit, give us freedom to love with Christ’s love, and to embrace the world with his compassion. Help us to live lives worthy of our callings, overflowing with gratitude for the hope we know in Christ, and guide us in your ways, until your kingdom comes.

We lift these prayers in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, the one who taught us to pray together, saying: **Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**