

Date: Sunday August 23, 2009

Scripture: John 6:60-69

Title: “Eternal Life”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Jesus challenges his follows about the words that he shares and Peter wonders about it all.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): Eternal life is more than what happens after human life ends – it’s what happens when true living begins – life that begins with God, a loving God and loving God and loving neighbor, and loving enemy, and loving self.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

A preacher and a member of the congregation were concluding a conversation and the preacher said that the church member should start thinking about the Hereafter. The church member responded, “Oh pastor I already do that. No matter where I am, at work, at home, in the living room, in the kitchen, in the garage, and even at the grocery store, I keep thinking to myself, what am I here after” (Miller)? I mention that story that I happened to find on the last page of a brand new joke book, because today we are going to spend some time on the Hereafter.

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). These words from John 6 stand out to me every time I read this passage. As I read these words, I want to hear Peter making these comments with total commitment. On the other hand, I easily hear Peter’s words ringing with doubt and fear. I hear Peter saying we just might go somewhere else, but we don’t know where that would be for you have something, know something, that we are drawn to and deeply desire. This struggle between commitment and confusion by Peter is part of a

pattern. My research with Paul Janssen's work on Lectionary Homiletics website shows that there is a strong tradition in the gospels of Peter making a significant confession and commitment to Jesus at key moments in Jesus' ministry (see Mk 8:27-30, Mt 16:13-20, Lk 9:18-21) only to have that commitment melt away.

Think about it. Peter is the one who confesses Jesus as the Christ but then does not understand what he has confessed, for when Jesus announces his coming suffering, Peter rejects the claim. Peter is the one who denies Christ at Jesus' most vulnerable time after saying he would not do so. Peter is the one willing to get out of the boat and walk to Jesus on the water, but immediately becomes frightened and calls out because of little faith. Now he bounces between wondering where else would we go and recognizing Jesus' power and purpose.

It's no wonder that generations of believers have identified with Peter. Who among us has not lacked understanding at times? Who among us has not felt burdened and troubled on our spiritual journeys? Who among us has not wanted to say to God, "You have got to be kidding!" We can relate to Peter in the midst of misunderstanding and deep curiosity. There is much to be curious about as we follow Jesus including the question, to whom shall we go?

I have been impressed, thankful, and grateful, as I reflected on last week's worship service. I have shared before that I often don't remember what I preached on prior Sundays. Our dear friend and long time church member Leora Schupp had a habit of questioning me about something that I preached in a sermon three or four weeks earlier. I would think to myself, I can't remember what I preached last Sunday let alone three or four weeks ago, but I would go back and look up

the sermon so that she and I could have a conversation about her question. But I will not have any difficulty remembering last week's worship and the wonderful, beautiful, thoughtful questions and comments raised by some of you during the worship service. Those questions will stay with me. And I have been particularly focused this week on our conversation last week concerning what happens after death. That is another of the reasons I focus on the statement in today's passage about the words of eternal life.

I am more convinced all the time that the expression, "eternal life", isn't really about what happens to us individually after we shuffle off from this mortal experience. We often think of eternal life as "the life of the age to come." We envision it as life as we will live it in God's future: the lion dwelling with the lamb and the child playing over the snake's den. It will be life in which there are enough vines and fig trees for everyone and everyone who plants will enjoy the fruit; Life in which children don't die young and aren't afflicted with horrendous diseases. Eternal life will be the life where there is no more crying and no more tears. It's the life of the new Adam and the new Eve (Janssen). Those are some of the ways people have pictured and described eternal life.

In fact, there are probably about as many ideas of eternity as there are people. A number of you last Sunday were still talking about ideas of life after death on the way out the building. I appreciate all the images, the enthusiasm, and the wonderment you possess about eternal life. Still, as I said last week, ultimately we just don't know what it will be like. We can think about it, imagine it, share our ideas, want to convince others we have some kind of inside track to knowing what

eternal life will be, but we don't. I had a conversation with a dear lady this week who was talking about life after death. She said to me, "Pastor we don't know what it will be like, that's up to God." I nodded my head. It is God's business. And I find that to be reassuring. God takes good care of God's business. Remember, God is good all the time and all the time, God is good. So eternity being in the hands of God's is the best place for it.

Today I would like to take a slightly different approach to eternal life. Can eternal life only be in the future? If there is eternal life, and I believe wholeheartedly there is, than can it only start somewhere in the future? Doesn't eternal life have to be present now as well? Yes, eternal life has a good bit of the tomorrow in it, but it's not just for tomorrow; it's also for today. But what is eternal life? What does it look like and feel like? It has to be more than the hustle and bustle of the 21st Century. The question becomes how do we experience eternal life besides for dying?

Well, that's part of what Peter was trying to get at when he said to Jesus, "You have the words of eternal life." He must be wondering if the words of eternal life are like a password that unlocks a door. I hear him saying, "You have the words," but also wondering, "What are those words?" that will help us be more fully alive for all eternity?

What are they again, indeed? Jesus has already spoken the words that freely give us the life that is eternal life. We've heard them all before, but I share them again now. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself"

(Matthew 22: 37-39). And, though it's in another conversation (Jannsen), Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43). Those are the words of eternal life.

Yes, eternal life is love. Eternal life is loving God, loving neighbor, loving enemy, and loving self. But some might say that is easier said than done. Well, OK, I would agree that we can make it very tough, although that's what we are doing right now, we are here loving God. However, and this is where it starts to become a challenge, our loving God is more than a one-hour a week job. Do you love your husband or your wife or your partner or your kids or your parents just 1/168 of each week? (That's how much time we spend in worship over the course of a week, 1 hour out of 168 hours). Loving God is being about God all the time. It's putting God first. It's honoring "the maker of heaven and earth." To love God, to live eternal life, is to create and add the joy of God to this God-loved world. It is the sharing of God's love.

We are called to share that love with others particularly neighbor and enemy. Now the neighbor and the enemy can be pretty hard to distinguish. The classic parable of the Good Samaritan makes that clear. Your enemy is your neighbor, says Jesus. If eternal life consists of loving our neighbor and loving our enemy and the neighbor and the enemy are not that easy to tell apart, then we will find eternal life by exerting our spirits to refrain from hating those that some mislabel as Islamic Fundamental Extremists. Instead, we will strain ourselves to try to understand them and others. Sometimes we'll find it hard to agree on anything, but in the process of discovering our neighbor in our enemy, we'll get some glimpse of what it means for

the lion to lie down the lamb. Maybe that was never meant to be pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by, but a lived reality (Jannsen). In other words, getting to know those we are tempted to call our enemy and accepting that they have a valid perspective on life, could be eternal life being lived in the here and now.

Our living eternal life of love right now might mean recognizing and acknowledging that forty six million Americans who go without health insurance deserve to be protected. Voice after voice of concern about why health care reform is not needed is broadcast everyday and multiple times each day. Very seldom do we hear the stories of those who live without health care. Instead what we do hear is, it is good enough for me the way it is, it works just fine for me the way it is, I don't see any need to change from the way it is, so leave it alone. Being selfish is not living a life of love.

Now I say this as a person who gets free health care benefits. As most of you probably know, my health insurance premiums are paid one hundred percent by the congregation and I appreciate that very much. Still, there is talk about health insurance benefits being taxed. That means that the value of my health insurance premium, about \$8200.00 a year, could become taxable income to me. You know what my first thought was when I heard that possibility? No way! I pay enough in taxes. I'm calling my representative. I might even call or write the President. That's just wrong. But then, after thinking about it, praying about it, and wondering about the right thing to do, not what is in my best financial interest, but the right thing, I realized that if my paying extra in taxes helps to cover other people who go without health care coverage, then so be it, I am willing to do my part. It seems to

me to be one more way to love our neighbor.

Picture this scene. Health care reform has finally been passed. An elderly woman is in a hospital bed and is being given the treatment she needs for that very moment of her life. All the machines that had been monitoring her, pumping medication into her veins, and hydrating her are all gone by her direction. She has reached the end of her human life. But she is not alone. At her bedside sits her daughter who says “It’s OK to go, mom, in heaven everyone we love is there.” But the mother says to daughter, “No, dear; in heaven we love everyone who’s there” (Janssen).

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Today’s good news is eternal life is more than what happens after human life ends – it’s what happens when true living begins – life that begins with God, a loving God and loving God and loving neighbor, and loving enemy, and loving self. Eternal life is loving everyone who’s here – everyone. When we do that, we are doing more than thinking about the hereafter, we are living the hereafter right now. Let us pray.

Eternal God,

Your almighty presence is great and grand but is beyond our complete comprehension. Therefore, we seek to know you right where we are. When we drift from living for you and sharing your love, turn us back to the moment at hand

so that we are attentive to you in the here and now. As we do so, we can begin to see your eternity springing forth from the present rather than it being only another dimension waiting for us. With gratitude for your timelessness we pray. Amen.

Offering: God is good all the time and all the time God is good. Let us give because of God's goodness. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: God, we ask that you accept and bless these gifts and use them through us for the good of your children all around the world. This we pray, Amen.

Benediction: Go forth children of God, blessed by God's eternal love, and carrying that love into the world. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Go forth. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

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Miller, Paul; World's Greatest Collection of Church Jokes; Barbour Publishing: Uhrichsville, OH; 2003