
ETERNAL LIFE HAS BEGUN

I JOHN 5:6-16

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, MAY 16, 2021 BY THE REV. DR. CAROL GREGG

Prayer.

Her comment surprised me. She said something along the lines of “You better get used to me; you have me for all eternity.” She said this not as a loving promise nor of a threat of future retribution. Instead, she stated it as fact. The context was a book discussion in my living room a few years ago. The conversation was lively, peppered with banter and laughter, as well as thoughtful reflection on the book. I honestly can’t remember what prompted her comment, but it gave me pause, which is perhaps why it has stayed with me. “You better get used to me; you have me for all eternity.” Her meaning was that the relationship we were forging would endure -- forever. No matter how long our earthly lives intersected, as sisters in Christ, we were bound together for the rest of time. The clock marking the beginning of eternal life would not start at some future point, the point of earthly death; no that clock, in many respects, was already ticking. As I have reflected on her comment, I like it more and more, not only because I appreciate the woman who said it, but also because it reminds me that eternal life has begun.

In recent weeks, we have heard a number of readings from First John. Matt read from the 5th chapter this morning. While we refer to it as a letter, it doesn’t have the typical form of a letter with a greeting and farewell, so some think of it as a sermon or public essay. This sermon or essay is directed to the church; it is an internal document aimed at those who are followers of Jesus. Its purpose is to challenge and correct the teaching of some within the church. Apparently, there were those who focused their teaching so much on the divinity of Jesus, they ignored, neglected, or downplayed the humanity of Jesus. Further, because the emphasis was on the divine nature of Jesus, the significance of his very human sacrificial death was denied. Dissident teaching of this sort may have led to or linked to the gnostic teaching of the second-century in which “claims to perfectionism, denial of the significance of Jesus’ coming in the flesh and rejection of the saving power of Jesus’ death” were hallmarks.¹ You can hear how First John confronts these erroneous teachings. The author writes, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (I John 1:8) and “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (I John 4:10). Then the author continues with “Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” (I John 4:20) Throughout this letter, the author is encouraging those of us within the church to embody a genuine love for one another, the way Jesus embodied God’s love for us.

This message reminds me of an old, old cliché. It is as if the author of First John does not want us to be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good.

First John, as a counter to those who too heavenly minded, brings us back to earth with the theme of loving one another here and now. So the author writes, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” (I John 4:11-12)

Norm Wrizba, a professor at Duke Divinity School, teaches that the Christian life is about “transformation, not transportation”, a concept he includes in his forthcoming book called *This Sacred Life: Humanity’s Place in a Wounded World*. The issue is that sometimes we, as Christians, tend to think of our faith primarily as a means of getting into heaven. Faith is the ticket to an eternal reward. What happens in this current life is of little consequence especially when compared to an ultimate destiny, therefore Christianity is all about getting from here/earth to there/heaven. The concern with this, Wrizba asserts, is the focus on transportation “solves nothing if sinful ways

¹ The New Oxford Annotated Bible, p.349

are not healed first.”² Transformation of our lives allows us to experience and share the love of God. Such transformation is not for individuals alone, but also for communities, society, and our world.

The transportation model of Christianity can be attractive as it gives us an escape from listening to news such as that of last weekend’s gun violence, 9 mass shootings across the country, 260 shootings total,³ or the current escalation of conflict between Israel and Paelstine. It is tempting to close ourselves off from the dangers and disasters of this world and focus only on the hope of a better destination. But this is not what scripture teaches. Our love for others is to be “not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” (I John 3:18) In order to love, we need to be transformed. Allowing God to transform us and our communities is hard. It may make us wonder if life could turn out differently.

I recently read the novel, *The Midnight Library*, by Matt Haig. The protagonist, a woman named Nora, is in despair as the book opens. After committing suicide, she discovered that she is not dead, but rather in an in-between state that allows her to experiment with different life outcomes. In the midnight library, she is allowed to pick one book at a time, from an infinite selection, all describing different life outcomes. If she had pursued swimming, what would have happened? If she stayed in a particular relationship, would she be happily married? She learns that each choice throughout her life changes her life’s trajectory. After trying on a variety of lives, she is quickly overwhelmed by the choices. If she could transform into any other life, how could she possibly know which one to choose?

Ignatius of Loyola was a Spanish priest in the 16th century who is known for teaching discernment. He starts with the assumption that God loves us and wants the best for us, while also assuming that we long to give our best to God. He is convinced that the Christian life is one of growth, of desire to hear and respond to God’s voice, and ultimately to become ever-more Christ-like in our daily lives. We want to love and be loved as First John encourages. And yet we hear Mary Oliver’s classic question, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”⁴ Like the protagonist, Nora, sometimes, we find ourselves unable to answer.

Ignatius encouraged the faithful to notice the various motivations at work in our lives, while reflecting on that which draws us closer to God and that which pulls us away from God. Slowly, with time and practice, he helps people discern how to be in tune with the movements that leads toward God. It could be described as “learned intuition”⁵ so that the focus is on not what to do, but who to be. The transformation, the following of God’s call, then leads to faithful decisions and meaningful engagement with the world and its inhabitants. Ignatian spirituality seems to want to bring the divine into the ordinariness and challenge of life, such that the love of God molds us into loving people.

Do you think all this has caused the pendulum to swing too far in the other direction? Has First John’s admonition to “love one another because love comes from God” (I John 4:7) allowed us to ignore eternal consequences? I think not.

As First John comes to a conclusion, the author claims that we see the testimony of God in Jesus, through water, blood, and Spirit. In his baptism and crucifixion, in the movement of the Holy Spirit, we see the testimony of God in his son Jesus. Jesus who is divine and human. Then we read, “And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.” (I John 5:11) And more, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.” (I John 5:13)

² Norm Wrizba, personal email, April 19, 2021

³ “The mass shooting in Colorado Springs was part of a terrible weekend of gun violence”, Washington Post, May 10, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/05/10/weekend-gun-violence/>

⁴ Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day,” <https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-projects/poetry-180/all-poems/item/poetry-180-133/the-summer-day/>

⁵ Mark Thibodeaux, *God’s Voice Within*

These words echo the ending of the gospel of John. In John 20 we read, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30-31)

In both First John and the gospel of John, belief and life are intertwined. Also intertwined are the already and not yet. Life now and eternal life. One commentator writes, that

“Life (zoê) and eternal life (zoê aiônios) are virtual synonyms in John’s Gospel and in 1 John. In John 17:3, Jesus prays to God: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Eternal life begins here and now for those who believe in Jesus Christ and know the only true God.”⁶

As soon as we believe in Jesus, eternal life has begun. As soon as we know ourselves as claimed and beloved by God, true life begins.

According to the gospel of John, in describing himself as the good shepherd, Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10) In saying this Jesus included no time qualifications, as if the abundance of God’s grace and love is only for some future time. The good shepherd cares for the sheep now, and for all eternity. God’s desire for us is to live life in his presence now and always.

According to First John, life today and life forever is marked by love. Our lives are first claimed by God through Jesus as precious and beloved, and then we are called and formed for love of others. This is the long continuum of life eternal which has already begun. This is good news for the impatient among us. We don’t have to wait for the heavenly life to start in some future time. It has already begun. Our call is to open our eyes to it. This is not as mysterious as it sounds. In First John we read, “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” (I John 4:12)

We see other people all the time. We see them in different colors and shapes and sizes and abilities and political persuasions. We are to love them.

We see other people in our families and neighborhoods. Those who are easy to like and those who test our patience. We are to love them.

We see other people in the church. Those whose theologies are varied, whose taste in music is diverse, and whose style of worship is not ours. We are to love them.

These people we see all the time are the very same ones we will see for all eternity, so we might as well start loving them now. As we do, we might just find that promised abundant life, now and forever.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

⁶ Elizabeth Johnson, Working Preacher, May 16, 2021 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-1-john-59-13-5>