

What is Eternal Life

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Texts: John 3: 1-17

Oh Boy- What a periscope! I wish we could address it all, but it's not going to happen this morning. We are taking a deep and winding dive into just 2 of the verses this morning so I thank you in advance for sticking with me! And now let us pray? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you Oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Our lengthy passage this morning begins in the midst of a conversation between Jesus and this man Nicodemus, a Pharisee who would visit Jesus in the middle of the night, not with a boombox outside his bedroom window, but to seek further understanding about Jesus' connection to God. This conversation centered in a relationship produces one of the most well-known verses of the Bible: John 3:16. Some have termed it the spark notes of the New Testament or the gospel in a nutshell. Does anyone still use spark notes anymore? Perhaps it should be more fittingly called Chat GPT's attempt at the Bible.

In any case, as we contemplate the idea of truth telling this Lenten season this reading from our lectionary that includes this verse John 3:16 feels all the more fitting for us to ponder as many have upheld it as a truth for themselves and for the world in sometimes life-giving or violent ways. I'm sure we've seen this verse on car bumper stickers, on signs at sports games, plastered on decor at Marshalls or HomeGoods, pictured next to images of Jesus on the cross or next to the word love surrounded by a crown of thorns on the internet. I myself long for those words to be placed next to an image of Jesus joyfully passing out freshly replenished wine to a crowd at a wedding, but I doubt I'll see that anytime soon.

Ok folks, let's get back on track— so what words are we talking about exactly? What does John 3:16 say to make it so famous? The verse reads: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Let's spend some time and unpack these words that are doing some pretty heavy theological lifting and therefore create room for a whole host of interpretations. It might be that the cultural conversation about these words immediately brings the cross to our minds, so much so that we instinctively complete the phrase "he gave his only Son" with the phrase "to die on

the cross” because so often that seems to be the only way to understand it. And certainly, the people receiving the gospel of John at the time would have been stirred to think of the cross by the image of Moses and the snake raised up on his staff that healed his community in their time of need, so our gravitation towards such a reading is understandable. But when I think about focusing on Jesus’ death as the only way in which God has given him over to the world and avoiding doing theology concerning his life and the resurrection, Cole Arthur Riley’s words echo in my mind when she says, “it seems cruel to believe that God would require grief to make a truth known.”

It also feels incompatible with the message of Jesus’ life that many have used this verse to exclude others from God’s love who don’t believe or intellectually assent to one way of seeing this passage. That if you don’t believe in Jesus rightly then you will be abandoned by God left to perish alone. If you don’t believe in Jesus’ what exactly is my question? His death? His ability to give one individual salvation through his death? His life? His mere existence? It’s unclear, as even the word to believe is more faithfully translated as to trust from the Ancient Greek *pistis* here.

It’s strange to interpret this verse as a divine condemnation of individuals in its broader context. We were just told that God so loved the world and that God was and is inherently deeply invested in its healing and wholeness always. In just the next verse the author says, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world.”

From what we know about love, it is not in God’s nature to condemn. Divine Love does not punish in the transactional way that us humans in our worst moments conjure up as a method to exact perceived fairness or to see ourselves as good over others. This uplifting of the truth of God’s non- violent nature is not new to progressive Christian interpretations of this verse, but it bears repeating. And at this point in our journey through this sentence, you might be saying so what? Where does that leave us here?

Well, we know that Jesus reveals a truth about God. Not that God requires a transaction to be appeased and that we need to intellectually assent to that in order to gain access to some kind of reward necessarily, but that God does not condemn even when humanity has done its worst and in fact God is continually involved in healing the world that God so loves. Revealed in Jesus’ life and the resurrection God brings life out of death and allows our wholeness to coexist with our woundedness. God assures us that the Spirit resides in our world and inspires new life and relationship with God and neighbor continually.

What if instead of inserting the words “to die on the cross” we automatically finished that phrase, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son to live in the world period.”? Jesus lived a life in the world that centered embodying love and justice, that opened the way into humility, in other words– into being born anew, even when we think we have the right answers. He lived a life that widened the circle, that reached across difference to pull people in closer to each other and to God’s redeeming Spirit that resided in his flesh. He showed us that goodness resides in ours too. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus reveals to us that the presence of God can infiltrate our ordinary lives, into our flesh and spirit intertwined, into the broken places of the world and inspire us to walk in ways of justice, mercy and love. To have eternal life. We have been called to live this truth.

Moving even further into this very complicated sentence– thanks for bearing with me friends...So what’s the deal with this eternal life thing? This past week I was helping plan some programming for the Spring with a small group of you First Church folks. The passage for this Sunday came up in conversation and someone in the group turned to me and said they don’t think they believe in eternal life, and I asked them sensing that they had a definition in mind- “well, what do you think eternal life means? Their immediate response to my question was to ask it right back to me: “do you know what it means?” and a stream of laughter flowed from us both as we acknowledged the inherent mystery in these words and their frequent association with a certain kind of afterlife. There was such spaciousness to admitting the limits of our human knowledge and naming what sometimes goes unspoken in a church community. The grace experienced in that honest exchange felt like eternal life to me. And, if I’m speaking truthfully, I’m somewhat agnostic about what happens when we leave this earthly life.

But what I am confident about is that God’s love endures beyond our individual lives and will always be with us and with those we have loved – that there is something connecting us all eternally somehow. How? I can’t pretend to be sure. But after reminding myself of the time that Jesus alludes to eternal life as being defined as knowing God in John Ch 17, I do wonder if this phrase eternal life has more to do with how fully we live our lives in the presence of God and love one another as God loves us than it has to do with what happens when we ultimately return to God and to creation in the end.

This morning I invite us to read this famous verse with all its complications and interpretations; and I invite us to trust in the ways Jesus’ life points to God’s love for the world and for us all, in the ways that Jesus’ life shows us God’s desire for us not to disappear into apathy or disconnection, but to love and to live an eternal life with Her.

Even in the moments we feel unwanted, even in the moments we feel unworthy and unlovable. Especially in those moments. God has called us into being for something more than shame, something more than feeling unworthiness or the fear that we are not believing a doctrine rightly when there are people to love right here right now. In the very same gospel in John Ch 10 verse 10, Jesus says, himself, that he came so that we might have life and have it abundantly, or as some translations say, “so that we might have life to the full.”

The fullness of life can be experienced when we look beyond exclusion and remember the abundance of God’s love for the world and for all people in it. The fullness of life can be known when we live our lives in that truth. We receive life eternal when we cultivate the kind of communities that embody and share in the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit that honors the dignity and worth of every person, that seeks justice for the oppressed, that helps us speak honestly about our faith, that makes the table bigger and widens the circle to include all who seek belonging. To trust in Jesus is to live our lives in deep service and connection to one another and to the presence of love even through death. By simply breathing, as we are worthy of God’s love by our very existence. I see this passage that floats above highways on billboards, from its preamble between Jesus and Nicodemus to its call for us all to see God’s love for the world as a passage grounded in relationship and humility, not in expedient individualism.

As we reflect on God’s love for the world as we look ahead to communion later on in our worship I hear Cole Arthur Riley’s words again in my ear. She says. “It means something that the Eucharist, this lasting ritual of the presence and memory of God, is a physical nourishment as much as it is spiritual... she continues on...I’ve heard much of bodily sacrifice, of taking up a cross, of dying and dying again. But I need to hear of resurrection—of the bodily love of receiving the Eucharist.”(p68) This Lenten season, let us put aside the things in our lives that lead us away from the truth of God’s love and presence in the world. Let us live a life that centers what is eternal: a life of knowing God through community and being witnessed in safety, through joy, through solidarity in our collective liberation, and through our eternal connection to one another and to God. Amen.