

And This Is Eternal Life

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 21, 2023

Readings: Acts 1:6-14; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11; Psalm 68

Sermon text: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” John 17:2

On the evening of Maundy Thursday Jesus gathered his disciples together for a Passover seder. In John’s account of the last supper, Jesus washed their feet as a lesson in servant leadership. Then according to other accounts they shared a meal, in which he said this is my body and blood about the bread and wine.

Then as John tells the story, Satan entered into Judas after taking the morsel of bread Jesus dipped in wine and abruptly left. Now it was night and Jesus began his final discourse, “Now the Son of man has been glorified and God has been glorified in hm” (13:31), a sort of valedictory address followed by a prayer for them.

He tells the disciples he will only be with them a little longer—he knew what was coming. He gave them them the new commandment, to love each other as he loved them (13:34, 15:12). If they do that, if they remain one with him, as he is one with the Father, and in unity with each other, Jesus will ask the Father to send them an advocate, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit of power. Peace he leaves with them and tells them do not let your hearts be troubled. He tells them metaphors of belonging with him and each other—as branches on the true vine. Abide in me as I in you he says again—so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete (15:11). They are no longer servants but friends—as they now know what the master knows, they have learned what the Teacher has to teach. So now he tells them, go and bear fruit. If some in the world hate you, well, they hated me first. But do not fear, he assures them, the Advocate will be with you. They look worried and are sad to see him go, but, Jesus tells them “it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away the Advocate will not come to you, but if I go I will send her to you” (16:7). There are still many things to tell them but Jesus says you cannot bear full reality yet—but the Spirit will come and guide them into all truth (16:13). You will suffer the pain of loss, Jesus tells them, but the pain will turn into joy just as the pain of a woman in labor is forgotten because of the joy of bringing a human being into the world (16:20-21). “I have said these things to you,” Jesus concludes, “so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” (16:33).

Love one another—as Jesus loves you. Abide in him, and you will have both peace and joy. Such is the message Jesus gives to his core disciples gathered

for the Last Supper before his arrest, trial and execution. Before his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension—which we celebrated this past Thursday. Before the Spirit he will send comes to light the world on fire—an event marked as Pentecost, next Sunday. Before all that yet Jesus said he had already conquered the world, he had already been glorified by God, and God glorified in him.

Jesus concludes the speech with a prayer to the Father, the beginning of which of which we just heard. Jesus prays for God to return him to his previous presence with God in the glory he had “before the world existed” (17:5). He prays the Father will protect his followers and friends “so that they may be one , as we are one” (17:11). Protect them from the evil one, he asks, and sanctify them in the truth, and not only these now here but all those ”who will believe in me through their word” (17:18). “Righteous Father,” Jesus concludes, “the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (17:25-26).

What is this knowledge that leads to the love that brings the peace and joy—that brings, indeed eternal life? What is this pearl of great price? This is summed in a sentence from this prayer— a sort of editorial insertion: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Think about that. Eternal life is not something we attain after mortal life is over, if we are welcomed into the presence of God. Eternal life—the presence of God—is something we can enter into now, in this life, through knowing God, the true and only God, and knowing Jesus the Son sent by the Father, along with the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth.

So what kind of knowing is this? A kind of deep heart understanding that allows us to enter into a relationship, not just the grasp of a set of propositions, doctrines and dogmas. No, knowing in the biblical sense—an intimate union of knower and known, like a lover and beloved. A relationship like a marriage—but one in which not only do the lovers know each other with the kind of knowledge only gained from daily living together, from extended conversations, shared life, shared care, including often care of shared children, a creature of each of them —so God loves us, as children, and sent Jesus to be among us, to share what God is in human form. And God is love—compassion, desire for good for the beloved, concern for all God’s children. God is strength and courage, creativity and joy, contentment and peace. These we gain, these we feel, these we can share with others and encourage them to seek a relationship with God in Christ too.

Like lovers, we can sometimes expect too much, misunderstand what gifts are given, desire things that cannot be given. We can hurt each other, fall out of love, turn bitter and see only the flaws and faults.

But God is not like that, if Jesus is the one to trust on God's nature, who shows us God's nature.

So follow him, love God—and enter into eternal life.

In christ's name, Amen

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