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The Second Sunday in Lent

The Reverend Joseph Kimmel
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

John 3:16



“For God so loved the world...”—John 3:16—a very famous verse, seen on many a homemade sign at football games, the verse translated into dozens of languages in the opening pages of a Gideon Bible, all around a very popular, well-known, and important verse. But why is it so important? And what might it mean? While we could spend hours unpacking each of the clauses of this profound verse, I’d like this morning to focus just on the final two words: “eternal life.” Not that we’re gonna sum that concept up in the next 10 minutes, but we have to start somewhere...

So, eternal life: what is it? what does this mean? It can certainly seem like a far-off, pie-in-the-sky idea, some nebulous future hope designed to help us keep pressing through the muck-and-mire of mundane earthly life. But if we keep reading in John’s Gospel, it’s clear that for Jesus, this concept—eternal life—is so much more than just a carrot on a stick urging us ahead, something deeply connected to hope and joy and fullness, something absolutely central to what Jesus’ life and mission was and is all about. So how does Jesus understand “life,” and especially “eternal life,” in John’s Gospel?

Paging through the rest of John, we see some important clues about Jesus’ view: For example: in John 10:10, Jesus says that he has come to “give life,” and not just any life but “abundant life”—life marked by the fullness and richness of God, the opposite of whatever diminishes or reduces your life. This “abundant life” is presented as each of us becoming fully alive, living out God’s dream for all that God has created you and me to become. Reading ahead in John, we then get to another important verse about life in John 17:3, where Jesus gives a pretty remarkable definition for “eternal life.” In this verse, Jesus defines “eternal life” not as going to Heaven after we die or living with God in the afterlife. In fact, the definition given by Jesus in this verse focuses more so on eternal life happening right now than on some postmortem experience limited only to the future. In 17:3, Jesus states plainly, “this is eternal life, that they [my followers] may know you [God], and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” In other words, this eternal life is a kind of life, a quality of life, a fullness of life accessible here and now by “knowing” God in Christ.

Now this kind of knowing has nothing to do with academic, intellectual, head-knowledge about God; it’s not the kind of knowledge that you get by reading books or attending Sunday forums or going to Bible studies. Jesus is talking here about a kind

of intimate, personal knowing—the deep knowledge of another person that comes over time through persistent, committed relationship. The kind of relationship (maybe with a lifelong friend or spouse) that feeds a deep sense of security, and even joy, because you know that person—and that person knows you—so well; the security and joy of knowing that that relationship has stood the test of time and will continue to endure, despite (and maybe even because of) whatever foibles or shortcomings you each bear; a security and joy of knowing that in the context of that relationship, you don't have to wear any masks or pretend that you're something you're not; rather you can relax into being who you are, knowing that you will be loved and accepted for being just that very person. Now, in the context of Jesus' words in John 17:3, it just so happens that in this case, the relationship Jesus is referring to is not with another human being but is the relationship we can each have with God—a relationship that has such potential for security and joy that Jesus equates it to eternal life itself.

And importantly, this life, this deep divine relationship, is something that we do not need to wait until the afterlife to begin cultivating. Knowing God, growing a relationship with God, is something that can happen right now. So, Jesus' words about eternal life here in John are an invitation to start eternal life now by letting go of all those things that diminish our fullness of life, all those things we think we need but actually impede our relationship with God.

I'd like to invite us to just pause for a second and consider: "What is one thing that currently diminishes my fullness of life?" One thing standing in the way of you and a more abundant life, one thing impeding the flow of loving relationship between you and God. It might be something like busyness—a need to always be going and never to be able to just stop and smell the proverbial roses. It might be a need for control, or of being the center of attention, or a need to always appear competent, strong, unflappable, inhumanly serene. More mundanely, it might be an excessive attraction to certain pleasures: Netflix, or social media, or in my case, white chocolate-macadamia nut cookies.

As we still settle into the early weeks of Lent, I invite you to consider how you might use this Lenten season as a time to let go of this thing diminishes your abundant, full, eternal life. What's one thing you could do to let go of that unhealthy attraction or habit? One thing you could do that would enhance your freedom?

your joy, your connection to God?

Practically, for me, leaving aside the cookie issue, I tend to be excessively busy, shuttling constantly between here, Cambridge, and Chestnut Hill, literally wearing different hats—or at least different clothes—as I go back-and-forth between parish and campus. This busyness provides a sense of identity, accomplishment, and even importance: in our heavily goal-oriented society, self-worth is very often—sadly—connected to busyness and achievement. “I must be important, just look at how busy I am; I must be valuable, otherwise I wouldn’t be so busy”—and the flip-side of this lie is also tragically easy to believe: that I’m not really valuable or important if I’m not being busy, if I’m not achieving. There are a host of problems with this way of thinking and living, but regardless, it simply is a dominant perspective that pervades our culture, especially here in New England.

But this rather shallow, self-centered, achievement-oriented mindset stands deeply opposed to the fullness of life offered to us in Christ: a depth and quality and richness of life that we cannot earn or achieve but simply must receive. And so, because I want this deeper life, because I want greater freedom from busyness and a shallow life of achievement, I decided this Lent to take 20 minutes each morning to do nothing: to just sit on my sofa with God, to just sit literally doing nothing, accomplishing/achieving/earning nothing, but just being quiet and present with Christ, stepping off the rat-race achievement mill long enough to sit with God, to take a drink of a more abundant life.

How about for you? What’s one thing you could do this Lent to taste eternal life? One act of resistance against the forces that rob you of deep, satisfying, abundant life? One practice or commitment that would be a step towards greater freedom, peace, and joy?

Christ comes to give us life: an eternal life full of an abundance that our hearts deeply yearn for. While this life has everything to do with what happens after death, we do not need to wait until our postmortem period to begin enjoying it. Eternal life starts now: may we live into it this week, letting go of anything and everything standing in the way of the abundant life Christ longs to give us.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.