



Eternal Life, Here and Now

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

August 15, 2021; John 6:51-58

When Carly was in preschool, I had a friend in the neighborhood who had kids the same age, and so we'd sometimes get together for playdates when on days we were both at home with the kids. One day during a playdate I used the phrase "life-giving" to refer to something. And she told me that phrase really bugged her. She said "what do you mean life-giving? I'm already alive. I can't be more alive. You're either alive, or you're dead." And I had to laugh. I understood where she was coming from. In a certain way she is right.

But in a certain way I'm not so sure. I once knew someone in recovery whose early years had been especially traumatic. He told me that in his early years of sobriety, he had talking with a counselor who was advising him, and he was resisting her advice. He said he didn't need to do what she was recommending; he knew how to survive, he had survived thus far. And she said to him, "Yes, you've survived. But you could also be happy." The difference struck him to the core. There is something beyond biological survival that it seems we yearn for.

Brian McLaren is a well-known author of books that talk about revitalizing the way of Jesus, and in one called *We Make the Road by Walking*, he says this:

What we all want is pretty simple, really. We want to be alive. To feel alive. Not just to exist but to thrive, to live out loud, walk tall, breathe free. We want to be less lonely, less exhausted, less conflicted or afraid More awake, more grateful, more energized and purposeful. We capture this kind of mindful, over brimming life in terms like well-being.... *Shalom*... wholeness, and aliveness.¹

There is such a thing as walking around fully alive on this earth, in the midst of life in all its messiness and beauty and suffering. There is such a thing as being whole even in our woundedness and eccentricity or ordinariness. It's part of what I suspect Jesus means when he talks about eternal life.

When you hear the phrase “eternal life” what do you think it means? Do you imagine that at the point that you die, the current temporary life you now enjoy is converted to a different kind of life, called “eternal” life, that you will then have in heaven? We in Christian faith affirm something called the resurrection of the body, so yes, we do believe there is life beyond death. This is especially important to remember when we lose loved ones, as several of us have recently, or when we face our own mortality. But can we limit eternity to mean a single line moving forward in time that has a beginning at our death? What if the eternal life Jesus is speaking about is meant to be about here and now, and about the future in this life, in addition to our future beyond death? What if eternal life is even meant to be about the past? What if the kind of life Jesus is speaking about has no limits at all?

¹ Brian McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Jericho Books, 2014), xv.

In today's gospel reading we heard Jesus say a lot of frankly strange things. And the more people called him on it the stranger and more outrageous he got. He says that the bread of heaven, given for the life of the world, is his flesh. When the people react to this he just gets more intense. In the English translation, he says "unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you". Which is bad enough. But the Greek word for "eat" here means more like "munch." That's hard to take. What does he mean?

It might help to look at the historical context around John's gospel. Some of the early groups trying to make sense of Jesus' death and resurrection thought that Jesus had not really come in a body, but that he was more or less a spirit. They thought that evil resides in physical reality, and pure goodness is limited to the spiritual and immaterial world. So naturally they thought that Jesus had to have been pure spirit. But John's gospel goes to great lengths to show that spirit and flesh go together. The Word became flesh, it insists. What if Jesus is saying that the life God wants to give us cannot be limited to the realm of the abstract and what we normally think of as "spiritual"? I think Jesus is saying that this eternal life is more like eating, and experiencing, and being nourished, than being impressed with miraculous signs or having otherworldly visions of God. That unless our relationship with Christ actually nourishes us as much as a wonderful meal does, we have missed the point.

From the very beginning of creation, when God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of the first human who became a living soul, flesh and breath, body and spirit, the divine and the human have gone together. It seems to me that Jesus cares very much about this. I believe Jesus wants people to understand there is truly eternal life in

front of us, and that we can wake up and live it. The alternative to this abundant eternal life that Christ offers is a kind of death – it's the death of thinking you are limited to survival. For the Israelites in the wilderness, the alternative to the life God offers was the death of preferring slavery in Egypt because at least there they knew where their next meal was coming from.

From the very beginning of creation there was this choice between life and death. Adam and Eve were told that if they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that they would die. We all know they didn't literally die. But they died in a certain sense. The knowledge of good and evil was the promise of spiritual certainty instead of trust in God, and that false certainty was a kind of death.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm pretty sure God does care about our survival. But God intends more life for us than that. Jesus fed 5,000 hungry people with loaves and fishes, and then he fed their souls. And this is what is meant for us, as well. In our human bodies, we are intended to thrive; to be nurtured physically, and also to know and experience the eternal life of God in every part of our lives here and now. Eternal life is also about the future—our individual futures in this life and the life to come, and also the future of the world God so loves, which is why in the Episcopal Church we focus on creation care and racial reconciliation. And I believe eternal life is even about the past, because the love and healing God offers us can forgive and redeem what has seemed beyond redemption and is not limited to linear time. The past, the present, and the future are layered together in the eternal life that God grants us, not at some distant point in the future, but collectively, here and now. And in this eternal life here and now there is thriving, and nourishment, and healing, and hope.

I have listened to people over the years speak about what nourishes them spiritually. One person has shared how his daily practice of Morning Prayer for many years has nourished him beyond all that he could have imagined. Another person said that going up to the Boundary Waters and looking at the vast night sky, undimmed by the lights of cities, and how awed he was by the beauty of God's created universe. Someone else talked about sitting on a rock on a beach in Hawaii, watching sea turtles swim around, and feeling so moved she could cry. Another said that when we opened up the scriptures and discovered that the stories in them still speak truth and promise to us today, that is nourishing. The beauty and divine life of God is all around us, in this actual world, in each one of us, and we are meant to experience it and be nourished by it.

When have you experienced moving past mere survival, or living on autopilot, to sense something of the overflowing life God desires for you? Where in your life do you most need that right now? As we move toward fall, and the pandemic seems to be on the upswing again, many of us are so weary and perhaps resentful and many other things. Perhaps the world feels like it's tightening and restricting and getting worse again. And yet, right in the midst of that, Jesus says that he is the bread of life, that there is eternal life to be had right here and right now, no matter what the external circumstances of our lives might be. So let's let that sink in. Let's become aware of the eternal life of God, which has no beginning and no end, and which springs forth in all directions for our sake. Let us allow the parts of our past that seem beyond redemption to be gathered up, forgiven and healed. Let us rejoice that no matter what happens with the pandemic or politics or even this beautiful natural world, that we can be grounded in trust

and joy and not fear. Let's be nourished together by Jesus, the bread from heaven, as we partake later this morning in the Eucharist. May God grant us eternal life, springing forth in all directions, for the sake of the world God so loves. Amen.