



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 12 Proper 15 (B)

Eternal Life

RCL: 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

What does it mean to have eternal life? Is this simply going to Heaven and living forever? Intuitively, eternal life seems like an unlimited number of days — our lives extended over an infinite expanse of time — but that’s not actually what eternal life is. The difference between mortal life and eternal life is not just a difference of quantity, not just a question of living 80 years versus trillions of years, but a categorical difference: eternal life is something totally and utterly different from mortal life.

The ancient world had a conception of eternal life, and to them, it sounded *amful*: the Greek goddess of the dawn was said to have fallen in love with Tithonus, a prince of Troy, and asked Zeus to make him immortal so that they could remain together always. Zeus agreed, but rather than making him like one of the Greek gods, he made him an ever-living human. Thus, he grew from a dashing 20-something prince to a balding, dad-bodied, 40-something prince, and as he continued to age into his 70s, 90s, 150s, 380s, he grew smaller and smaller. When “Loathsome old age pressed full upon him, and he could not move nor lift his limbs,” says an ancient poem, he became nothing but a tiny creaking voice. To the ancient Greeks, the idea of living forever just sounded like an endless gauntlet of cataract surgeries and colonoscopies, and they wanted no part of it. But the Christian conception of eternal life is something entirely different.

If you are up in the mountains somewhere, in a cabin deep in the woods, without internet, television, or any human contact for weeks at a time, and if by setting your little transistor radio in exactly the right spot, you can *just* manage to get the crackly AM signal of a faraway opera station, this tinny music might seem like a wonderful, overwhelming gift in the silence of your week. But even though a beautiful piece of music in the wilderness might bring you to tears, it is literally *nothing* compared to the experience of Maria Callas singing an aria at full volume, six inches from your face.

The things that we value in this life: being loved, friendship, peace, joy, beauty, truth, justice, goodness — these all seem to us like diverse goals that we spend our lives pursuing. According to many of the Early Fathers and Mothers of the Church, however, these are not actually separate goods, but are all one thing: they are the experiences of the presence of God.

If you stare up at the sun for too long, you start to see nothing but darkness. This is not because the sun disappears and doesn't give you light anymore, but because there is *way too much* light, there is more than you can take in, and so you are blinded. If, however, you hold up a prism and allow it to catch the blinding light of the sun, it splits this ray into the comprehensible spectrum of colors: into rich blue, vivid red, deep green, and so forth.

In a similar manner, if you try to stare at God, you see only darkness, not because he is hidden or won't reveal himself to you, but because he is infinite, eternal; God is far too huge for us to comprehend. But when the experiences of God's actions are filtered through the prism of the world, we experience his presence as beauty, truth, compassion, justice, peace, joy, and love. These are certainly not gods, nor are they the essence of God, but instead, they are glimpses, shadows, the faintest reflections of the true goodness of God.

In this life, we see God in this distant way, and the signs of his presence are our deepest desires. If you could have infinite joy, how much would you sell it for? A million dollars? A billion dollars? Unless you were sacrificing your own joy for the sake of another, what could possibly induce you to give up this life of perfection?

The same is true of knowing the depth of how much you are loved, of seeing the infinite beauty of every person and object, of having perfect justice or perfect peace on the earth. These signs of the presence of God, the shadows of glimpses of the reality of God, are the motivations for all that we pursue, all that we desire in the world. We chase after perfect beauty in something we can buy, we seek perfect peace in the ultimate vacation, the idyllic home life, but we end up with missed connections and broken HVAC systems, and we never get to perfection.

Eternal life is not a limitless number of days but is instead the in-your-face, full-volume Maria Callas experience of God. It is drinking from the fount of all joy, of all goodness, of all love — it is knowing God without mediation, without limitation.

In today's Gospel, Christ says that eternal life is neither a thing to be pursued or acquired nor is it a place that we go after we die. It is instead a person; eternal life *is* Jesus Christ. He says, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them."

We are given mortal life through mortal food and drink: we are kept alive, day by day, by pizza and Pepsi, by eggs and milk, by bread and wine. You can increase or decrease your consumption but give up food and water for Lent and you might not make it to Easter. Lettuce is in the process of dying; salami is long dead. These mortal foods bring dying life to our bodies. When we eat the flesh of Christ, drink the blood of Christ, we are not consuming death to live another day, but are fed the Bread of Life himself. We are being changed by the body of Christ, transformed by the body of Christ, to become the body of Christ through his flesh and blood.

At the incarnation, the Word of God, God the Son, becomes flesh and blood – with us and for us. Children on the playgrounds of Nazareth came to know and receive the body of Christ through loving him. Men and women in the streets of Jerusalem received the body of Christ by touching him, learning from him.

When we read the Word of God, we meet Jesus in the flesh; we receive God the Son, not in darkness or through a prism, but in living flesh and blood. Those of us who become part of his body receive his flesh in the form of bread, and receive his blood from the chalice. Some of us do this daily or weekly, others who are far from a church or have no priest do this monthly or annually, others still, like the great hermit St. Mary of Egypt, once or twice in their lives.

Whenever it is that we meet God the Son in his flesh and blood, we are given the gift of eternal life, not just after death, but here and now. We are allowed a glimpse into reality: into the ravishing beauty of every human being, into the astonishing order by which, or rather, through whom, all things are made; we begin to receive the joy of God, the peace of God that passes all understanding, and we are made aware of the true reality of the love of our Heavenly Father that undergirds, surrounds, and blankets the whole of Creation.

The Lord Jesus Christ invites you to receive him in the flesh. To know him in the words of Scripture, in your prayers, and by partaking of his body and blood in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Eternal life, unmediated life, the fullness of the divine life, is yours for the asking, here and now. Will you trust Jesus enough to let him feed you?

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