

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 16: 1-11
SECOND LESSON: 1 John 5:9-13
May 16, 2021

“Eternal Life”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

It is said that if you are not sure whether you have ended up in heaven or Hell when you die there is one sure way to know.

In heaven:

- The cooks are French.
- The policemen are English.
- The mechanics are German.
- The lovers are Italian, and
- The bankers are Swiss.

In hell:

- The cooks are English.
- The policemen are German.
- The mechanics are French.
- The lovers are Swiss, and
- The bankers are Italian.

We do talk a lot in our culture about heaven and hell, even though we have no idea what either really are! Scripture tends to phrase things differently. Scripture talks about eternal life with God.

Many of the letters in the New Testament take the form of persuasive argument. It's called apologetic—not because they are apologizing for anything in the way we think of the word—but because they are arguing the case for faith. There is a limit to how effective apologetic can be, however, because ultimately we always return to the reality that no one can be argued into the kingdom of God. Faith is as much a gift as it is a logical conclusion. Most people don't come to believe because they have been presented with a truly awesome argument. Most come to believe because of personal experience. God has touched them. They have felt God's presence and seen God's hand at work in their lives. This can be seen in the somewhat circular argument from 1 John we read this morning. The author says we accept human testimony—therefore we ought to accept God's testimony which is greater. But exactly what is the source of God's testimony? It is the witnesses who lived with Jesus and experienced everything that happened. But the final proof 1 John offers of God's testimony is that God has given us eternal life. Because we have eternal life, we know the testimony is true. And because we believe, we have eternal

life. To me that looks like a chicken and egg sort of situation, and it begs the question—how do we know we have eternal life?

We may think we know what eternal life is, but we really don't. Eternal life is not the same thing as immortality. People have long sought immortality. For thousands of year people searched for the mythical fountain of youth. Ponce de Leon thought he found it in Florida. I think we can all agree that while a lot of odd things can be found in Florida including invasive species like lionfish, four-foot lizards that eat everything in their path, aggressive catfish that can walk from one body of water to another, and the strangest political atmosphere in the nation, to date there is no fountain of youth. Today some people even pay to have their bodies put in cold storage until science grants them immortality. But living a really, really, really long time is not eternal life. Never dying is also not eternal life in the sense that the bible means eternal life. In fact, if we stop to think about it, never dying could amount to eternal torture. As one person I read put it, *people who can't even figure out what to do on a rainy Sunday afternoon want to live forever. What are they thinking?*

So what is it—this eternal life? Well, here's your biblical Greek lesson for the day! There are three different Greek words that mean endless or eternal. The word we translate as "eternal" in "eternal life" is not one of them. *Aionios* (a-ee-o'-nee-os) means "age" as in an undefined period of time. It's an eon. It's the age to come. It can be endless, but it doesn't have to be. What is far more important is the nature and quality of it. Eternal life or *aionios zoe*, is different from ordinary life. Essentially it operates outside of time, inside of time, and beyond time. It has an entirely different nature because it involves the direct presence of God.

All of us forget that time is a created thing. We believe that time is an immutable fact of the universe, the same everywhere for everyone. We are still hanging out with Sir Isaac Newton who taught that time was absolute and flowed without regard to anything else. But beginning in 1905 Albert Einstein started to mess with our heads, combining space and time into spacetime. He said there was no absolute time. Time depends upon how fast we are moving. It's just that in normal life these differences are so small we don't notice them. Ten years later he came up with the Theory of General Relativity adding gravity to the mix. And it's only gotten worse from there. Suffice it to say, asking someone what time it is, is not as simple as it used to be. Time is part of our physical created universe guided by rules that we still don't truly understand. But GOD EXISTS OUTSIDE OF TIME. And our brains are incapable of understanding what that looks like.

Eternal life in the sense that 1 John puts it, exists side by side with us in linear time. We have already begun to participate in this eternal life, even while we are still stuck in linear time because of our relationship with God's son Jesus. We have been profoundly and permanently connected to a reality outside of ourselves and our world. What has changed is our direct connection to God, and our new spiritual connection to one another in the body of Christ.

Evangelicals today emphasize forgiveness and heaven. When you die, you'll go to heaven. First century Christians did not emphasize this. It was part but not the whole of the message, because forgiveness is the beginning not the end of our faith. They also focused much more on the resurrection and very

little on heaven. What God has given us is new life. Through Jesus we can truly have an intimate relationship with God. The Holy Spirit dwells in us. Our brokenness and sin have been dealt with on the cross. We're connected to God. We can experience God's love, and we can share that love with others.

So why is it that it doesn't always feel that way? The fact is, we are still stuck between two realities, and because we are physical beings the material world easily grabs our attention. Underlying this is a primal fear of death. While most of the animal kingdom experiences grief, as far as we can tell, only humans are aware of their own demise. Yet we live in total denial of our own mortality. Medically we do almost anything to extend human life, even for a few days. And when that doesn't work, we distract ourselves. The modus operandi of contemporary society is one long gambit at diversion. I am always made more acutely aware of this when I go on retreat to an Episcopalian monastery on the Hudson River, something I have not been able to do since Covid. After four days with no television, times of silence and prayer, long walks and worship, my whole inner self begins to shift. I slow down, and become more aware of the presence of God. And just as I am beginning to feel reconnected, I come home to the nightly news.

Eternity, in the sense of being never-ending, also terrifies us. What could any of us think to do forever and ever? Wouldn't there be a point at which nothing would matter anymore? Wouldn't we run out of stuff to do and places to go? When I contemplate the sheer infinite nature of the universe and infinite time, I am overwhelmed. My physical human brain wants to just shut it all out. But that is because I am thinking of time in my terms. God's time is quite literally, not my time. Eternal life is not one long tedious sequence of events. It is something we are incapable of understanding while we are in this life, but not something we need ever fear.

When we walk in the power and peace of the Holy Spirit we experience a glimpse of eternal life now. When our hearts are full of love and grace—we taste God's eternal life. When we grieve the loss of a loved one we can take comfort in the fact that all of the suffering they experienced in this world has been removed and replaced with an everlasting peace, wholeness and joy. And when our time comes, as it will for all of us, we do not need to be afraid, because eternal life is life in the presence of the God who is pure love. Amen.

Psalm 16: 1-11

¹ Keep me safe, my God,
for in you I take refuge.

² I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord;
apart from you I have no good thing."

³ I say of the holy people who are in the land,
"They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight."

⁴ Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more.
I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods
or take up their names on my lips.

- ⁵ Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup;
you make my lot secure.
- ⁶ The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance.
- ⁷ I will praise the Lord, who counsels me;
even at night my heart instructs me.
- ⁸ I keep my eyes always on the Lord.
With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.
- ⁹ Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure,
- ¹⁰ because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,
nor will you let your faithful one see decay.
- ¹¹ You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

1 John 5:9-13

- ⁹ We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. ¹⁰ Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. ¹¹ And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.
- ¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.