

The Life Eternal

Scripture Readings: Ephesians 5:15-20 and John 6:51-58

I'm not sure I ever really appreciated time before. The ways it can move beyond reason, the ways it concertinas, it accordions around us, stretching out interminably or collapsing to devastating, incomprehensible quickness... I didn't understand, until I tried to get my two toddlers out the door "on time". Children force humility like that, shattering my illusion –that I have anything like control over when there will be some sort of sticker based emergency, or a sudden rebellion against the constraints of wearing shoes. These things happen.

And before the Greek chorus of y'all begin reminding me to enjoy every moment and oh it goes by too quickly – you're right, you're right, it does. While being used as a pillow, napkin, trampoline, and Kleenex in the space of about ten minutes is still.. a lot. It is no challenge to love and adore my children. It is occasionally a challenge to cherish the shrieking and flailing of a nearly two year old adamant that she is not. Going. To. Bed. And. You. Can't. Make. Her. Because guess what ...you can't make her. But my kids have given me a Holy gift of sharpening my sense of time.

I'm more aware of how fleeting and precious it all is, eager to hold on to every snuggle, building memories to shore up against the inevitability of life's slings and arrows. I am learning to be aware and awake to my life. I am learning to be alive for whatever time I get. Big moments in life can do that to us – births and losses, divorces and marriages, baptisms and funerals – each can call us to crisp, stark attention about what really matters to us.

Now there are many reasons we let ourselves be dulled around the edges, instead of sharpened and alert. We fill moments and days and years with TV and refreshing our feeds, with gossip and consumption. We all do it. Maybe we're tired. Maybe we're resistant. We don't want to feel too much because if we do we might just feel everything, and that seems like a lot of work.

Paul knew the pressure of time ...he wrote the letter to the church at Ephesus, knowing that time was short, knowing that he couldn't *make* them do anything either. But darned if he didn't try. From prison no less! Or so the story goes for this Deutero-Pauline text to a community that was near and dear to Paul's heart.... Today's passage from Ephesians is smack in the middle of this letter to a fledgling community of Gentiles nascent to the faith and it's a short letter that covers a Holy host of ground.

The recipients were being reminded of the ways God collapses the space between the Gentiles and the Jewish community. Paul is instructing or reminding them of what it means to be the church. He calls them to attend to the ways in which they are to be of this world and beyond this world in terms of how they live their lives. He is calling them to awaken. As my three year old says right around dawn daily... "Mommy look! The sun! Wake up! It's time!!"

Some of Paul's letter gets into some territory that most progressive leaning preachers would like to avoid, myself very much included. The admonitions against drunkenness, of speaking ill of others, lust and adultery, all the stuff that we know is not of God but we don't want to be the kind of church that just lectures folks. Don't want to get too...preachy. Yet it matters that we understand the context from which these words arise – Paul is eager, no, desperate to make sure this baby church hears the Good News, and is convinced that hearing the Good News means a complete life transformation for folks. After all, that's what it meant for him.

And I get it – we are the church of the open door, and the day that becomes something we say instead of something we are is a day we should stop calling ourselves a church. We don't hand the

ushers a check list of behaviors and habits at the door to determine who gets in and who gets left out. But being a non-doctrinal tradition doesn't mean that we pretend how we live doesn't matter. Your choices matter. How you live your life matters. It does for me too. Whether I choose to be compassionate or callous, generous or defensive, kind or cruel in an instant – it matters.

Paul exhorts these new followers to understand that their lives and choices matter, and he's begging them to seek the path of Wisdom. The opening line of this passage gets translated as "Be very careful, then, how you live" or "pay close attention to how to live", and what follows isn't meant to be a litany of restrictions that narrow life for would-be Christ followers. What this letter is meant to do, instead, is encourage readers to live well for their own sake, for the sake of the community in which Christ is calling them to live. It's a call to be alive to our faith, to resist that which causes us distraction, that we might live more fully.

To live attentively is to live guided by wisdom. Wisdom was a virtue, a sacred concept, both to the Jewish community and the newly converted Gentiles, and Wisdom was thought of inclusively, accessible to all. Wisdom is the invitation to not just, you know, avoid adultery, but to cherish and honor the whole being of the people to whom we make commitments –body and soul alike. Wisdom is not just an admonishment that if we're going to be part of the life of the church we shouldn't gossip about each other or speak unkindly to each other, to assume the worst about each other or let fly with facebook comments with no regard for the humanity of those on the other end. No, we should already be past that. Wisdom is the call to live so far past that unsatisfying existence. It is the call to speak psalms to and about one another, sing to one another, to live so that every word from our lips is praise. It is the call to live right with each other and therefore live right with God.

And perhaps Paul is so keyed up in conveying this to the Ephesians because he understands that God really means it. That when Christ taught his followers how to be in community with one another, how to care for each other, it wasn't a suggestion for if and when we feel like it and there's nothing good on TV. It was an invitation into the immediate life eternal.

John's Gospel here helps us understand that the "life eternal" doesn't just mean heaven. Because that's what we tend to assume it is, right? That when a saint leaves us, they join the life eternal. Beautiful. But John's gospel presents it differently – that we are already living in the life eternal. The life to which Jesus is inviting people is not limited to an afterlife, and that's often how it's translated in Matthew and Mark, a clear demarcation between life on earth and life beyond. But John... John uses the phrases "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *have* eternal life", and, later, "I tell you whoever believes has eternal life". Did you catch that? It's the present tense! John's Jesus is affirming that the space between the human and the divine is collapsed in Christ, and the table is set, here and now, waiting for us. Like manna from heaven all that is needed has already been provided. And what is eternal is also immediate – it's right now, and always – this love of God through Jesus Christ. It is in the cosmic and the next door neighbor, the big decisions we've made that chart our course through life and the countless unthinking little choices that comprise a day. The life eternal is something we enter into over and over again, when we come to the table, when we baptize our children, when we remember and recommit to the promises of embodying God's love in the world.

When we remember to wake up and appreciate that this life, this day, this moment of your life matters to God, and we live accordingly, that is the life eternal.

Parker Palmer reminds us of this when he writes "Sooner or later, everything falls away. You, the work you've done, your successes, large and small, your failures, too. Those moments when you were light, alongside the times you became one with the night. The friends the people you loved

who loved you, those who might have wished you ill, none of this is forever. All of it is soon to go, or going, or long gone. Everything falls away, except the thread you've followed, unknowing, all along. The thread that strings together all you've been and done, the thread you didn't know you were tracking until, toward the end, you see that the thread is what stays as everything else falls away. Follow that thread as far as you can and you'll find that it does not end, but weaves into the unimaginable vastness of life. Your life never was the solo turn it seemed to be. It was always part of the great weave of nature and humanity, an immensity we come to know only as we follow our own small threads to the place where they merge with the boundless whole. Each of our threads runs its course, then joins in life together. This magnificent tapestry – this masterpiece in which we live forever”.

So perhaps what happens when we remember to be awake and fully alive is that somewhere, something, plucks a string, the single thread strums, and the reverberations are felt across the tapestry we share. And it is there – in the space between my thread and yours, between you and me – that God is found.

Friends, we belong to each other. And if John was right, if the life eternal starts right now, then we don't have time to waste. How we live matters. Today. Right now. And forever. Amen.

Sermon preached by Reverend Dr. Laurie Lyter Bright at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
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