

1 John 5:9-13

In our reading from 1 John today, we are told that God gives us eternal life in Jesus Christ. For the longest time, I had only thought of eternal life in terms of the afterlife, life after death. Natural enough, I suppose. This current life is far from eternal. Most of us are too well aware of our own mortality. We know that eternal life doesn't mean life exactly like it is now. So we tend to think of eternal life as something beginning later. But as I used to tell my students, "We don't sprinkle you with magic dust at graduation. Who you are now is who you will be in college, at least at the start." The reality is, our eternal lives are going on right here, right now. The kind of people we are are the kind of people we will be for eternity. There's no magic dust when we graduate from this life, either.

That, at least as far as I understand it, is kind of the rationale for the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. How can imperfect people enter into the perfect presence of God? Well, maybe they need some time purging themselves. It isn't pleasant, but at least there is the knowledge that it is temporary. There is a goal. Reasonable, perhaps, but not terribly Biblical. Then again, the Bible is really pretty vague about exactly what happens to us after death. The few people who are raised from the dead don't mention what they experienced.

Our Lord Christ does talk about going before us to prepare a place for us. But when he is asked for details, like about who will be at his right hand in the next life, we are only told that it is not his call to make. We are told that in the resurrection there is neither marriage nor giving in marriage, which can be either distressing or comforting depending upon your situation. The writer of Revelation has a lot of visions about goings on in heaven, but anyone who thinks they really understand Revelation is mistaken.

In reading the Bible, you kind of get the impression that what the next life is like is less important than what we are doing in this life. Unfortunately, Christianity is often treated less like a way to be in communion with God and more of how to avoid going to Hell. Baptism is not a "Get out of Hell Free" card. Our Baptism into the Body of Christ is the outward and visible sign of our being made part of the family of God. Whether we were infants in our mothers' arms or well into adulthood, we were made one with Christ forever. In baptism, God establishes an indissoluble bond. We are sealed as Christ's own forever. We enter in to the eternal life of God.

But we are not just killing time until that life starts. We are living right here, right now. Your eternal life has begun. We are going to be the people that we are for a very long time, so we best be comfortable with who we are, and be trying to get better. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis puts it this way.

Christianity asserts that every individual human being is going to live for ever. ... Now there are a good many things which would not be worth bothering about if I were going to live only seventy years, but which I had better bother about very seriously if I am going to live for ever. Perhaps my bad temper or my jealousy are gradually getting worse —so gradually that the increase in seventy years will not be very noticeable. But it might be absolute hell in a million years: in fact, if Christianity is true, Hell is the precisely correct technical term for what it would be.

As people of eternal life, we need to be taking the long view. We need to think in terms of eternity. When we are dealing with eternity, time tends to lose its meaning. To quote *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, "Time is an illusion. Lunchtime doubly so." And in fact, one of the hot topics of debate in modern physics is whether time really exists at all. For me, time is a result of our human

limitations. As the White Queen tells Alice, "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards." For us as corporeal human beings, time has the appearance of simply flowing forward. For God – and interestingly for the cutting edge of physics – all time is now. It is how God can know the future without causing the future. It is how we juxtapose God's omniscience with our free will. And I am geeky enough to get quite a thrill when theology and quantum mechanics come together.

But what do we do as a result of our understanding of ourselves as having eternal life? What effect does this have on us? Interestingly enough, one thing it means is that having all the time in the world means that we need to be aware of the little things, because they will be with us forever. As I tell couples in premarital counseling, those little quirks that you find endearing now turn into your biggest gripe in just a few years. What used to be cute grates on you like sand paper. You can't change that, but it helps to be aware of it. So we need to take the time to really reflect on the kind of people we are. Are we compassionate, caring, charitable? Are we slow to anger and quick to love? These are the characteristics our Lord demonstrated in his life among us.

Do we strive to find the most charitable explanation for the behavior of others? Or do we assume the worst? How will that play out in eternity? Do we love our enemies or seek vengeance? How will that look in eternity? The people we are becoming now are the people we will be. What are we striving to become? How well are we living an eternal life? It is a daunting thought. Even if we are just a little off now, if we keep it up, in a million years where will we be if we don't change?

When you're talking about eternity, achieving perfect is not as important as striving for perfection. We aren't required to be perfect to have eternal life. It has been given to us. But we are going to have to live with it for a very long time. How well do we strive for perfection? How willing are we to examine our lives and try to see where we can do better? How willing are we to change, to allow ourselves to be transformed, into the perfection our God desires for us? We are talking about eternity here, after all. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*