



Sermon, May 30, 2021  
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Junction City United Methodist Church

## Sermon Series: Parting Thoughts “What Is Eternal Life?”

### Scriptures:

#### **Ecclesiastes 3:9-15**

<sup>9</sup> What gain have the workers from their toil? <sup>10</sup> I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. <sup>11</sup> He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. <sup>12</sup> I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; <sup>13</sup> moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. <sup>14</sup> I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. <sup>15</sup> That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

#### **Luke 10:25-28**

<sup>25</sup> Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup> He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup> He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

A disciple of a popular guru visits the guru at his mountaintop retreat. “Oh Holy Vessel of Universal Wisdom,” says the disciple, “what is the secret of eternal life?” The venerable guru replies, “Lie about your age.”

### **Why is Eternal Life an issue? Why the question?**

Have you ever gone out on a starry night and looked up at the sky in amazement at all that is out there? Or looked through a telescope to discover that that little star over there is actually a galaxy with its own billions of stars? Or marveled when astronomers tell us that light from the furthest stars has been traveling for billions of years to reach us? How about the fact that this distance is measured in terms of how far light travels in a year? At 186,282 miles per second, with a year having 31,556,926 seconds, a light year is 5.88 trillion miles. Then think about trying to travel even to the nearest star, which is Proxima Centauri, about 4.35 light-years away at conventional speeds of travel, even for rocket ships, and you just might say, “It would take *forever* to get there.”

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The writer of Ecclesiastes says that God has put a sense of past and future, or in many translations, *eternity*, in the hearts and minds of humans. It is this sense of eternity makes us look up at the evening sky and marvel at the flow of time and space, and wonder about what existed before time. Is there a reality not bounded by time – as ancient and unfathomable as time itself might be?

We talk about God being eternal – without beginning and without end. That is what distinguishes God from us – we have a beginning, and even if we don't consider death to be the final end, our lives are bounded by finitude.

So, if you think about it, the lawyer's question is actually absurd. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus should answer him by saying, “You fool! No one can have eternal life but God alone! Only God is eternal!” In essence, the idea that any of us can gain eternal life is blasphemous – we are implying that we can somehow become God. Perhaps the problem is in how we translate this phrase from the Greek. Perhaps rather than talking about “eternal life” we should actually translate it as “the life of eternity.” More precisely, let me suggest that we think of it as being *the life that is possible for us by sharing in the life of the One who is eternal*.

When the lawyer puts the question to Jesus (and then answers it to the satisfaction of Jesus) he quotes the *Shema* and then Leviticus 19:18. Eternal life is not something we inherit, but something we live into. We *experience* eternal life when we fix our minds, hearts, wills, and actions upon God and choose the way of love that Jesus demonstrated. Jesus showed us what loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves looks like.

This is the life of eternity. It is called “eternal” because it breathes the essence of and is the design of the One who is Eternal. Jesus continually told people that the Realm of God was within them. Ecclesiastes says that God has put a sense of past and future within us, which tells us that we have come from someplace and we are going someplace. We have a destiny that is with the One who is eternal, and so our job here in this in-between place of the present is do the things that are eternal in nature. The things that are eternal in nature are the actions wherein we love God by loving our neighbor as being part of ourselves.

God has placed eternity in our minds. Whenever we look at the world around us and say, “There has to be a better way,” we are recognizing that

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a better way does exist, which is the way of the Eternal One, a better life that is the life of the Eternal One. That is Eternal Life.

Make no mistake, our lives have trajectories to them. Our future doesn't drop predestined and pre-formed in front of us. No, we shape the future – our future – by our every action, our every thought, our every word. Jesus reminds us of this when he says, “for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.” (Luke 6:44) Paul picks up on this theme in Galatians 6:7, “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.” What is the kind of life do we want to see here on earth? What seeds will we sow? What seeds are being sown by others? What kind of life do we want to experience after we die? They are all tied together. The afterlife is not some giant escape from this world, no matter how many songs we sing like that. We shape our afterlife by how we live our lives here. That is the Way of Eternity. We don't learn it all here on earth. This is just a starting place, a launching pad. But just like launching a rocket, where we aim ourselves determines where we go.

I want you to think about that for a moment. Very few of us understand everything that went into launching rockets into space and sending someone to the moon. The movie “Hidden Figures” revealed to us not only the black women who were hidden from view whose mathematical brilliance ultimately enabled the moon shots, but also the mathematical complexity involved in charting a course in space. For example, Katherine Gobel Johnson is depicted as applying Euler's Method of using differential equations. Euler's method is a technique applied to what is called a differential equation. These equations often show up, among many other places, in physics problems that describe the path of a moving object subject to changing forces. For example, when a capsule is flying through space, gravity is constantly tugging at it. How hard gravity pulls is related to distance, so as the spacecraft gets nearer to or farther away from Earth, the forces on it also change.

Our trajectory through life is like the trajectory of that spacecraft: we launch ourselves, but we are subjected to all sort of forces that pull at us this way and that, throwing us off course or drawing us toward our target. God has determined a way of being in life that is analogous to the mathematical

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formulas that Dr. Johnson used while she worked at NASA to launch rockets and help them get to their intended destinations.

Memorial Day weekend in which we remember and honor those who have fallen in service to our country. But think for a moment about what they were fighting against: the very forces of fascism, Nazism, and autocratic rule that are wanting to take over our country, and re-emerge in Europe. These are those forces that tug and pull at us, constantly pulling us off-course.

### **Life abundant is Jesus’ goal – Getting heaven into us**

In John 10:10, Jesus shares his mission statement with the world: “I am come that they might have life, and have it abundantly.” He doesn’t say anything in this mission statement about life after death. It is about the quality and character of life here and now. “Do this and you will *live*.” Jesus came to show us the way to an abundant life that comes by being infused with a consciousness of God.

As you know by now, I am fond of quoting Rev. Frederick Ward Kates: "The purpose of religion -- at any rate, the Christian religion -- is not to get you into heaven, but to get heaven into you."

<http://www.worldofquotes.com/author/Frederick-Ward-Kates/1/index.html>

The Way that Jesus lived and taught, in other words, is not a ticket into an eternal dinner party with God. It is about a life that is infused and filled with a consciousness of the presence of God. This consciousness changes us. It changes our attitudes. It changes our behavior. It changes our priorities. It heals many of our inner wounds. It instills hope within us. It connects us with a deeper sense of purpose. It plugs us into a web of deep and richly meaningful relationships. It engages us in actions that help people in need, advance the cause of justice, and make the world a better and safer place for all people.

### **Do it by loving our neighbor – in practical life-giving ways**

Make no mistake, however. Such a life has a trajectory to it. A life that is lived with God at the center will fly like an arrow straight into the presence of God. But it is an arrow that we shoot here and now. “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” Here. Now.

Think of it this way: Paradise is the garden we plant every day, sown with the seeds of every choice we make, every word we utter, every broken

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heart we heal, every life we save, every meal we share, every chain we shatter, every blessing we pronounce, every injustice we end.

“Jesus did not come to get you into heaven. Jesus came to get heaven into you.” And with heaven within us, our task is to get heaven out into the world. But if heaven is within us, then the One who dwells in heaven is there also. We don’t do this alone.

“Do this, and you will *live!*”