

SERMON: Living Eternity Now

TEXT: John 17:1-11

Many years ago before I went to seminary, I worked as an office manager in an architectural firm. I was the only female, and the only administrative staff, among eight to ten male architects. It was an adventure, to be sure! In my free time I was very involved in my church – singing in the choir, serving on committees – you know how it works. At this point in my life I had no plans to become a minister, but some of the guys at work every now and then would engage me in theological discussions.

One particular conversation I remember was about heaven. Jeff, who was quite arrogant, asked me what heaven was supposed to be like. I don't remember what I said, but I do remember his argument. "I love to play golf," he said. "But if I get to heaven and end up playing golf for the rest of eternity, I think I'll get bored." I know Jeff was challenging me just for his own entertainment. And, even though he seemed genuinely interested in my thoughts on the matter, I know he enjoyed watching my reactions to his ridiculous theory.

Well, we all have questions about heaven, I guess. And eternity is a concept that is hard to get your head around. But Jesus, in his prayer for the disciples

before he was crucified, talked of eternal life. “And this is eternal life,” Jesus prayed to his Father, “that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

We’re more likely to think of pearly gates and streets of gold when we think of eternal life. One theologian explained, “It’s being in relationship with God and Christ, what John calls *knowing* and it’s available in its entirety now.... When all is said and done, what deeper desire exists than to know and be truly known, understand and be truly understood, love and be truly loved? According to John, that’s the meaning of life.” This scholar goes on to say, “One cannot deeply love that which one does not know. And knowing depends upon authentic relationship and regular encounter with the beloved.” (Jaime Clark-Soles, www.workingpreacher.org, May 4, 2008)

John Calvin – yes, the Father of Presbyterianism – wrote a great deal on this subject as well. His argument was that we cannot know God without knowing ourselves, and we cannot know ourselves without knowing God.

You know, if you’ve been with someone you love when their death is imminent, sometimes they reveal things about themselves that they’ve never told

anyone before. They also tend to affirm the important relationships and proclaim their love for family and friends. The one who is leaving also wants to make sure their loved ones will be taken care of. Jesus had similar things on his mind.

Remember that Jesus was praying as he shared his last meal with his disciples before they all departed for the Garden of Gethsemane where he would be betrayed and arrested. These were some of his final words before his death. He wanted the disciples to remember all that he taught so they would know “the only true God.” He prayed that God would protect them and unify them and keep them together. As Jesus was likely hoping to move quickly through his own death to achieve eternal life, he wanted his disciples to be able to share it with him now – the joy, the hope, the freedom, the victory of LIVING ETERNITY NOW.

We, his disciples of today, can have it, too, by knowing and loving God, knowing and loving Jesus, knowing and loving and sharing community with God’s people.

Of course, as you might imagine, it doesn’t happen automatically or without some work on our end. Eternal life is available to us, but at the same time, we also have to achieve it or bring it about. And we have to make sure that others have the

same opportunity as we have for LIVING ETERNITY NOW. Frederick Buechner wrote, “Compassion is sometimes the fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.”

Many of you already understand that one of the primary purposes of the church is to be a demonstration of the kingdom of God on earth. Not all churches operate with this emphasis. Instead, they find their purpose in saving souls and helping people get to heaven. In the Presbyterian Church, we strive to show people heaven, to bring a little heaven to earth.

In the verses that we read from the book of Acts this morning, Jesus was ascending into heaven and his disciples were watching in surprise and astonishment. Then two men in white robes appeared and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” To us, it is perfectly understandable that they are looking up, probably with mouths wide open. But their attention is brought back down to earth, I believe because that’s where their attention needs to be. What’s important is what happens down here. We are called to continue Christ’s work until he comes again.

Some of my pastor friends on Facebook have a habit of posting stories and introducing them with the words, “the kin-dom of God is like....” And, yes, they use “kin-dom” instead of “kingdom” to emphasize an equal relationship rather than a hierarchical relationship.

Two such stories came out of the terror that occurred in Manchester, England last week. One told of a homeless man who was in the area when the bomb went off. He found a woman who was severely injured, and he held her and comforted her while she died. Another story told of a woman in a nearby hotel who summoned children as they ran from the arena. She gathered about 50 children in the hotel lobby and then posted on Facebook and Twitter that they were there and she would stay with them and keep them safe until family members could pick them up.

A professor of political science wrote following the Manchester tragedy, an article titled, *How social ties make us resilient to trauma*. “In Manchester, residents offered rides, food, water and shelter to all, using social media tags like #roomforManchester. Taxi drivers took people home from the concert arena without charge.... Blood banks around Manchester received so many donations that they started turning people away less than 24 hours after the bombing. These

emergent collective actions were not coordinated by governmental authorities, but instead evolved from feelings of connection and decency.... During and after traumatic events, we need other people. Social ties measurably lessen the effects of trauma and allow us to grieve, work through our adversity, and create and offer support.... As we struggle to find words to express our shock and sympathy for those who were harmed, we should not forget the healing power of building connections to each other.” (Daniel P. Aldrich, *How social ties make us resilient to trauma*, theconversation.com, May 23, 2017)

Another “kin-dom of God” or LIVING ETERNITY NOW story I read this week was about a Jesuit-run St. Francis mission that returned over 500 acres of land to the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. The article stated, “Generally, the history between the Jesuits and Native peoples of the Americas is one that is marred with colonial onslaughts on indigenous lands, culture and life ways. The Jesuits seek to change this course, and, evidently, make amends with Native peoples.” The president of the St. Francis Mission said, “It’s meaningful that we not continue to hold land that rightly belongs to Lakota people.” (Sarah Sunshine Manning, *Jesuits Return 525 Acres to Rosebud Sioux Tribe*, Indian Country Today, May 19, 2017)

For me, these are demonstrations of the kin-dom of God. LIVING ETERNITY NOW is about offering life and love, healing and restoration,

compassion and justice, acceptance and welcome and community to others.

LIVING ETERNITY NOW is about knowing Christ and making Christ known.

Welcome to your eternal life! May we live it and share it... to the glory of God!

AMEN.